

The Compatibility of a Liberal Education

With a Consumer Culture

Marsha Kobre Anderson, Ph.D.

Sierra Nevada College

and

The Document Doctor

Introduction

I teach in a strip mall—on the second floor above a now defunct Asian Buffet restaurant. The building that is the Las Vegas campus of Sierra Nevada College, whose main campus is in Incline Village on Lake Tahoe in northern Nevada, is actually located in the Green Valley section of Henderson in southern Nevada. This area has been among the fastest growing in the United States for about 2 decades.

Sierra Nevada College is a small—tiny, in fact—liberal arts college with a proud 40-plus-year record in the industry and sport of skiing and its management among many other specialties. The only private liberal arts college based in Nevada, Sierra Nevada College has, in the last decade, expanded its programs to include a Master of Arts in Teaching (M.A.T.) degree which enables a student to gain teacher certification. Just last year, a Master of Education (M.Ed.) program was established to help teachers improve their instructional and leadership skills. These two programs responded to two environmental conditions. First, the population boom in southern Nevada has pushed Clark County School District (CCSD), the local county-based public school district encompassing about 8,000 square miles, from the 14th to the fifth largest school district in the country in less than 20 years. It enrolls nearly 350,000 students in grades K-12 in about 350 schools. CCSD is also the largest employer in Nevada (Nevada Department of Employment, Training and Rehabilitation, 2009) with about 18,000 state certified teachers and a hiring rate of about 800 new teachers annually. The current recession has hit Las Vegas hard, however, and the decline in the population boom is leading to teacher layoffs rather than new hires. The second program, the M.Ed., responds to the need for currently employed teachers to gain additional credits to move up the salary scale.

I am an adjunct instructor in the M.A.T. program, teaching two or more sections simultaneously of the course Educational Issues and the Research Process, chairing master's theses—usually about 10 or more at a time, and supervising as many as 10 student teachers each semester. This combination adds up to full-time work for part-time pay and lacks the benefits of health insurance, retirement, summers off, and continuous employment. It is the context of my work at Sierra Nevada College that sets the stage for examining one question asked during this conference: “Can anything be done to preserve liberal education within the predominant consumer culture?”

In contemplating the notion of a consumer culture, one scene comes strongly to mind. In the movie *Moscow on the Hudson*, a Russian musician played by Robin Williams chooses to defect to the United States in the Bloomingdale's department store in Manhattan. Overwhelmed by the variety of choices available, he covers behind a sales counter and proclaims his eagerness to reside in America. This availability of options as well as money has fueled American consumers since the end of World War II. Higher education in the United States has actually been plagued by this difficulty practically since its inception in 1636. As a case in point, in the 1840s, Francis Wayland, President of Brown University, expressed concern about “the preference [of colleges] for buying students rather than offering a curriculum that students would buy” (Rudolph, 1962, p. 237). This paper centers on the historical and current willingness of students to buy a liberal education.

Consumer culture is stressed by the tension between social structures, such as colleges and universities; ideological issues, such as liberal education; and cultural necessities, such as jobs and careers. When consumers have freedom of choice, as they do in this country, what is available in the marketplace, the perceived value of a commodity, and the marketing strategies

used to sell a product impact the purchase (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). The product under consideration is liberal education, defined by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU; 2009) as follows:

Liberal Education is an approach to learning that empowers individuals and prepares them to deal with complexity, diversity, and change. It provides students with broad knowledge of the wider world (e.g. science, culture, and society) as well as in-depth study in a specific area of interest. A liberal education helps students develop a sense of social responsibility, as well as strong and transferable intellectual and practical skills such as communication, analytical and problem-solving skills, and a demonstrated ability to apply knowledge and skills in real-world settings. . . . Today, a liberal education usually includes a general education curriculum that provides broad learning in multiple disciplines and ways of knowing, along with more in-depth study in a major. (¶ 1-2)

General education, liberal arts, and liberal education are somewhat interchangeable terms. Regardless of which term is used, however, liberal education is believed to offer “the aristocratic ideal of the liberal arts as the passport to learning” (Rudolph, 1962, p. 455). I am the product of the breadth and depth of a liberal education, as defined by AACU, and I value what I learned in that context. I also acknowledge that many consumers of higher education historically and currently neither understand nor respect the need for a liberal education. When I teach teachers how to improve their own instructional capabilities and how to read about and conduct research, my own liberal education plays a strong part as I frequently bring into the discussion English literature, American history, mathematics, and science.

The consumer culture is indeed predominant. In his article “On Stupidity,” Thomas H. Benton (2008) commented, “We need to reverse the customer-service mentality that goes hand-

in-hand with the transformation of most college teaching into a part-time, transient occupation and the absence of any reliable assessment of course outcomes besides student evaluations” (¶ 26). Is the consumer culture so damaging to higher education that it needs to be reversed? I think not. In fact, the American system of higher education has always had a variety of consumer bases which are not incompatible with a liberal education as well as a long history of responding actively within the consumer-driven environment. Higher education serves and is served by students, faculty, administration, and governing boards, including local, state, or federal oversight bodies and, in many cases, religious organizations. Each of these consumer groups influences the curriculum and the *Zeitgeist* of the specific higher education entities.

Above all, it is important to remember that higher education is, in fact, a business which requires it to be self-sustaining; therefore, colleges and universities must be responsive to the consumer culture. To accomplish sustainability, these institutions must raise money through tuition and fees, private contributions, grants, endowments, subsidies, and auxiliary businesses. Revenue obviously depends upon customers who are willing to pay; therefore, the product of higher education must be marketable. In light of these realities, I hope in this paper to address the following classic higher education questions:

1. What is the product of higher education?
2. Who are its consumers?
3. Who benefits?
4. Who pays?

Two contexts provide the basic framework for considering these questions: (a) the history of higher education in the United States and (b) the factors of higher education cost. Through the examination of the history and economics of higher education, I will offer reflections to

demonstrate why I believe that a liberal education is compatible with the consumer culture and why colleges and universities must be customer-service driven to survive in the competitive higher education marketplace.

The History of Higher Education in the United States

The historical perspective on higher education in this country shows that colleges and universities have always been consumer-driven; the growth of higher education in recent years, in particular, supports this contention. A brief history sheds light on this belief.

Colonial Colleges

Before the Constitution was ratified in 1787 and the first census was conducted in 1790, the United States was still comprised of British colonies; therefore, the nine colonial colleges reflected an English college model. The first college was, of course, Harvard, established in 1636 “to advance Learning and perpetuate it to Posterity” (Rudolph, 1962, p. 4). Harvard’s other perpetuations included the English manners as learned at Oxford and Cambridge and the values of Puritanism. The primary goals of Harvard College were future-oriented, however—to develop civic leaders, clergymen, and cultured men. The first colonial college was therefore career-oriented, responding to a consumer need for a civilized world in an uncivilized environment—Colonial America.

The private-public nature of colonial colleges was actually defined as state-church, where each college was established by a combination of state authorization of land and/or funds and the hard work and money of a church. In Virginia in 1693, for example, the College of William and Mary was created primarily to supply the Anglican Church with clergymen (Rudolph, 1962) and secondarily to produce public servants. In contrast, Yale, in 1701, and Princeton, in 1746, pursued “denominational survival in an environment of religious diversity” (Rudolph, 1962, p.

8). Like many modern colleges, Yale began with three separate campuses—less for outreach, however, than for lack of decision making about where it should be located permanently. Moreover, as Harvard became more liberal religiously, its trustees, among them Cotton Mather, famous for his Puritanical hellfire and brimstone approach to preaching, sought to create Yale in a more conservative tradition. Subsequently, Princeton University, established by the Presbyterians, reflected the Great Awakening; Dartmouth College was founded by Congregationalists; Baptists created what became Brown University in Rhode Island; and in 1766, the Dutch Reformed Church “entered the fray with a college called Queen’s” (Rudolph, 1962, p. 11), later renamed Rutgers College. In Philadelphia and New York, the University of Pennsylvania and Columbia University, respectively, shifted the emphasis of higher education from the religious to the secular, and liberal education became defined as “Thinking, Writing and Acting Well” (Rudolph, 1962, p. 12). Another role of the college at the time, especially at Columbia, was to train teachers.

These nine colonial colleges set the tone for the subsequent 220 years or so of the American higher education system. Beginning as the haven for perpetuating a civil and religious aristocracy, the American system of higher education evolved into a meritocracy where, ultimately, every American man and woman would earn the right or privilege of obtaining a higher education. After the American Revolution, for example, many states sought to establish nondenominational and interdenominational colleges. This was accomplished, as it is today, through development of boards of trustees preferably made up of individuals of wealth and influence. Moreover, the goal of such colleges was to promote responsible citizenship for the new nation. One change that never occurred, however, was the establishment of a national university which had been promoted by Thomas Jefferson and many others early in the nation’s

history. Despite this failure, a college education became a part of the American Dream, and in 1790, the United States had 3,000 living college graduates; in 2006, nearly 1.5 million bachelor's degrees were awarded in this country in that year alone (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009).

A Proliferation of Colleges

Donald G. Tewksbury (1965) prophetically said, "Our country is to be a land of colleges" (p. 1). As a case in point, Rudolph (1962), in his classic history of higher education in the United States, reported that "as many as seven hundred colleges tried and failed before the Civil War" (p. 47). Many social and economic reasons led to the proliferation of colleges. First, Americans believe in the future, personal and social investment, and national purpose. Second, state loyalties and rivalries of that period led to the establishment of colleges everywhere. Third, from a practical economic viewpoint, keeping students in-state enables the state to retain the tuition and future earnings of its youth. Finally, even in the 19th century, Americans recognized that "going to college was a way of making more money than if you did not" (Rudolph, 1962, p. 65).

The proliferation of colleges that appeared before the Civil War was forced by the marketplace into cutthroat competition. In trying to satisfy the academic desires of students while continuing to honor the classical tradition of the *Yale Report of 1828*, superficial breadth replaced depth in coursework. As a result, graduates emerged from their collegiate experience expert at nothing. In examining this crisis in academe, Francis Wayland, president of Brown University, produced a report aimed at "bring[ing] the American college into line with the main economic and social developments of the age" (Rudolph, 1962, p. 239). Depth pressed for more faculty necessitating greater numbers of students to produce much needed increased revenue. Consequently, students of lower ability who could pay tuition flocked to Brown to promote Wayland's curriculum. This situation is not terribly different from 31 years ago when I started

my college professorial career by teaching remedial English composition and mathematics along with study skills at Colorado Women's College which was forced to accept all applicants in order to survive—which it did for only about 5 more years. That tactic obviously did not work either during Wayland's time or in the 1980s.

As the Civil War began, many U.S. colleges had to address their structure, their curriculum, their *Zeitgeist*, and their future. Did they want to embody the past or the future? The past meant the classical curriculum; the future emphasized science, creativity, and discovery “to meet the now imperative needs of an expanding industrial nation and of a developing national power” (Rudolph, 1962, p. 242). Other critical points in American history also reshaped the focus of higher education. Notably, the launching of Sputnik by the Russians in 1957 had colleges scrambling to expand their physics, mathematics, astronomy, and engineering offerings. Similarly, the invention of the relatively inexpensive personal computer (PC) forced colleges to consider ways of using this new technology, and Drew University has been touted as the first to include a PC in each new first-year student's tuition.

Finally, the prevalence of the Internet by the late 1990s expanded not only computer science courses and majors, but also led to new instructional delivery systems and freed colleges and universities—and their students—from the necessity of time- and place-bound coursework and degrees. In addition, this technological condition fertilized the field for the growth of the for-profit higher education sector, led by the Apollo Group, owners of the University of Phoenix, the largest higher education institution in the United States. Like the corporate entities they are, the for-profit colleges and universities could act quickly to develop and implement courses and degree programs.

Tables 1 and 2 show the changes in the nation and the proliferation of colleges and universities since 1790. Table 1 indicates the change in U.S. population over time; the percentage of change between censuses; the proportion of the White population, historically the group most likely to attend college; the proportion of 15-24 year-olds, the age range which includes traditional undergraduate students; and the proportion of U.S. residents with at least a bachelor’s degree. Table 2 displays the number of colleges, students, and instructors in the U.S. from 1870 through 2006; the proportion of full-time instructors from 1970-2006; and the growth in tuition revenue from 1880-2000. These data demonstrate the enormous growth in the higher education enterprise that now more than ever forces colleges and universities to consider responding to the consumer culture with a customer-service orientation in order to attract and retain students.

Table 1

U.S. Population, Population Change Each Census, White Population, Percentage of 15-24 Year-Olds, and Percentage of the Population With a Bachelor’s Degree or Higher: 1790-2000

Census Year	U.S. Population	Change	White Population	15-24 Year-Olds	Bachelor’s Degree or Higher
	<i>N</i>	%	%	%	%
1790	3,929,214	--	80.7	--	0.1
1800	5,308,483	+35.1	81.1	--	--
1810	7,239,881	+36.4	81.0	--	--
1820	9,638,453	+33.1	81.6	--	--
1830	12,866,020	+33.5	81.9	--	--
1840	17,069,453	+32.7	83.2	--	--

Census Year	U.S. Population	Change	White Population	15-24 Year-Olds	Bachelor's Degree or Higher
	<i>N</i>	%	%	%	%
1850	23,191,876	+35.9	84.3	--	--
1860	31,443,321	+35.6	85.6	--	--
1870	38,558,371	+22.6	87.1	--	--
1880	50,189,209	+30.2	86.5	--	--
1890	62,979,766	+25.5	87.5	--	--
1900	76,212,168	+21.0	87.9	19.6	--
1910	92,228,496	+21.0	88.9	19.7	--
1920	106,021,537	+15.0	89.7	17.7	--
1930	123,202,624	+16.2	89.8	18.3	--
1940	132,164,569	+7.3	89.8	18.2	4.6
1950	151,325,798	+14.5	89.5	14.7	6.2
1960	179,323,175	+18.5	88.6	13.4	7.7
1970	203,302,031	+13.4	87.6	17.4	10.7
1980	226,542,199	+11.4	85.9	18.8	16.2
1990	248,709,873	+9.8	83.9	14.8	20.3
2000	281,421,906	+13.2	75.1	13.9	24.4

Table 2

Higher Education Institutions, Number of Students, Number of Instructors, Percentage of Full-Time Instructors, and Revenue: 1870-2006

Year	Higher Education Institutions	Students	Instructors	Full-time Instructors	Revenue
	<i>N</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>N</i>	%	\$
1870	266	49,163	2,823	--	--
1880	364	60,072	4,241	--	1,929,060
1890	594	173,691	13,565	--	--
1900	1,023	224,284	22,134	--	27,739,154
1910	866	445,707	38,445	--	77,873,367
1920	1,042	674,663	51,207	--	137,055,415
1930	1,413	1,100,737	81,671	--	508,254,000
1940	1,708	1,494,203	131,552	--	637,497,000
1950	1,851	2,659,021	210,349	--	2,123,275,000
1960	2,008	3,216,000	380,554	--	5,786,000,000
1970	2,556	8,581,000	574,000	78.0	23,879,000,000
1980	3,231	12,097,000	846,000	66.0	65,585,000,000
1990	3,559	13,819,000	817,000	61.0	149,766,000,000
2000	4,182	15,312,300	1,113,000	56.0	174,503,000,000
2006	4,301	17,020,000	1,290,000	52.0	--

Matters of Curriculum

Every curriculum has, over time, been criticized for one reason or another and by one constituency or another. The colonial college curriculum, for instance, was characterized as “stultifying, unimaginative, [and] inadequate to the times” (Rudolph, 1962, p. 23). Early colleges emphasized the study of Latin, the basic language of law, the church, and philosophy. Ancient Greek was an addendum to liberal education, not a replacement for Latin. Hebrew ran a distant third in curriculum presence; however, the focus was on learning these three languages in order to read and understand classical texts and ideas in the areas of “logic, rhetoric, ethics, metaphysics, astronomy, physics, and mathematics” (Rudolph, 1962, p. 25). This classical liberal curriculum was organized to be learned over a 4-year period within a residential campus format.

Experiments in curriculum were also evident. At the University of Pennsylvania, one third of the curriculum consisted of science and practical studies, “the first systematic course in America not deriving from the medieval tradition nor intending to serve a religious purpose” (Rudolph, 1962, p. 32). After the Revolutionary War, French became popular, substituting for Greek at one school and acting as an admissions requirement at another. Religion lost its primacy among college students who were certainly indifferent to religion and, in many cases, were either agnostic or atheistic (Rudolph, 1962). The Enlightenment of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, reflected heavily at Columbia, brought study in economics, natural history, American history, constitutional government, chemistry, agriculture, and mechanic arts as well as French. English became its own discipline as long ago as 1795 at the University of North Carolina.

By the 1820s, the popular stance was to eliminate classics and include more modern languages and science which were “more meaningful and useful for contemporary life” (Rudolph, 1962, p. 113). Continuing to respond to the consumer-driven nature of higher

education, colleges permitted non-degree students to attend, and many instituted an alternative to the classical curriculum called the “literary-scientific course,” which either had no classics at all or diluted ones. At the same time, colleges such as Harvard began to model themselves increasingly on the German university, instituting elective courses and ability grouping. James Marsh, president of the University of Vermont, summarized the curricular reform of the 1820s when he commented, “Let us abolish the division of students into four classes through which they progress year by year. Let us simply have students, subjects of study, and standards of excellence” (Rudolph, 1962, p. 121).

At colleges like the University of Virginia, departments were called “schools,” and each school awarded diplomas which were not equivalent to bachelor’s degrees. In 1831, the school abandoned this concept in favor of Master of Arts degrees for students who completed a course of study in one of the five following colleges: (a) ancient languages, (b) mathematics, (c) natural philosophy, (d) chemistry, or (e) moral philosophy. These classically-oriented master’s degrees may or may not have had more academic rigor than the bachelor’s, but that did not matter for “there was not a job in the United States for which an M.A. was required or desired” (Rudolph, 1962, pp. 129-130). In spite of this, the groundbreaking *Yale Report of 1828* perpetuated the traditional classical course, discouraged the introduction of new subjects, and opposed the current trend of options and electives (Rudolph, 1962). The content of the *Yale Report* drove higher education curriculum from its creation through the Civil War. The influence of this report was important not only because the classical education was considered the best, but also because it was the least expensive to operate. Similarly, the modern classical curriculum, liberal education, is also relatively inexpensive.

The Costs of Higher Education

What does a college need to exist? American colleges all started with an idea—from a church, a state, an individual, or a group. Perhaps the college needed a building. It may have had professors and/or a president. Then the founders waited for students to apply or recruited them if the students did not appear quickly enough. If such colleges were truly consumer-driven, they would have begun by figuring out the needs of the students, as Princeton President Francis L. Patton commented at his inauguration in 1888, “College administration is a business in which trustees are partners, professors the salesmen and students the customers” (Rudolph, 1962, p. 161). Colleges need students and must market to them in order to attract them.

The bottom line issue in higher education is, well, the bottom line, so its costs must be considered. Higher education costs can be thought of in two primary ways: (a) opportunity costs and (b) unit costs. For the consumer, the opportunity cost of higher education is the amount of money spent on higher education that might have been used to pay for some other want or need. For a system of higher education—and society, in general—the opportunity costs are the consumer goods and social services that might have been purchased if those funds were not allotted to higher education (Bowen, 1980). Unit cost is the actual cost per student of operating a college or university; however, all students are not equal in terms of cost. Unit cost is lowest for first- and second-year students and increases as undergraduates select their majors, and classes become smaller. Master’s students, especially those in clinical programs such as teaching, nursing, or practice-centered counseling psychology, require even smaller classes and one-on-one supervision to complete their programs appropriately and successfully. When traditionally taught, doctoral programs are the most expensive, requiring small seminars, independent study, and dissertation supervision. In calculating revenue, colleges and universities must therefore

weight the unit costs depending on the proportion of students at each level. Liberal education, focusing on undergraduates, clearly offers the lowest cost.

In his evaluation of higher education costs, Howard Bowen (1980) viewed students as inputs and results as outputs. Learning and personal development, he said, are the individual outputs, and cultural and scientific advancement and economic growth are the societal outputs. Shifts have occurred over time relative to who goes to college in terms of numbers, race/ethnicity, gender, and age; who teaches in college in terms of tenure, non-tenure, adjunct, and full- or part-time; who administers the college in terms of scholar/administrators or corporate- and business-style administrators; and who governs a college in terms of elected or appointed government officials, wealthy contributors, private individuals, alumni, or other useful professionals such as attorneys and corporate executives. Further, the colleges and universities have changed substantially over time in size, number of campuses, delivery of education, and ownership. Mega-state universities with multiple campuses dominate some states. Private colleges and universities may have grown from single- to multi-campus entities. Universities may now be “systems” of higher education. In Nevada, for example, the state system of higher education includes 2-year community colleges, 4-year state colleges, universities, professional schools, and the Desert Research Institute. Many trade schools such as ITT and DeVry have transformed into degree-granting colleges, and other colleges have morphed into universities. In addition, for-profit higher education institutions such as the University of Phoenix have taken over the not-for-profit college environment with a focus on online delivery and quality control of course content and teaching. In fall 2006, the United States had 4,301 colleges and universities; of these, 1,686 were public 2- and 4-year institutions, 1,530 were private not-for-profit 4-year institutions, and 452 were private for-profit institutions (Planty, Hussar, Snyder, Provasnik,

Kena, Dinkes, et al., 2008). In addition, the vast majority of the private not-for-profit schools have fewer than 5,000 students, and the public colleges tend to have more than 5,000 students, with 50 having more than 30,000 students. Contemporary higher education has become a multi-billion dollar enterprise with more than 17 million students—and every school wants them (Planty et al., 2008).

The Competitive Marketplace

The U.S. college marketplace has long been competitive. Even before the Civil War, the battle for students was fiercely fought with tuition remission and scholarship funds. The problem was the continual sprouting of new colleges without regard to the available, interested consumers, almost exclusively young White men, generally of wealth, who could pay their way. Then as now, “Tuition fees remained low while the cost of [higher] education went up; the hidden difference was paid by the faculty” (Rudolph, 1962, p. 199); today that burdened faculty is the adjunct cohort.

The costs of a college have never kept pace with tuition revenue; the burden of this dilemma was historically placed on faculty in the form of extremely low pay. Francis Wayland, president of Brown, commented in 1842, “We cannot induce men to pursue a collegiate course unless we offer it vastly below the cost, if we do not give it away altogether” (Rudolph, 1962, p. 198). More than 150 years ago, more students meant more buildings, additional faculty, and often a reduction in tuition. Faculty already on staff did not merit salary increases simply due to the enrollment of more students. Other than the decrease in tuition—which virtually never happens—the situation does not differ today. Even in the presence of increased online and virtual instruction, colleges and universities build more buildings and hire more faculty. Today’s

primary faculty resource consists of the plethora of otherwise employed advanced degree-prepared workhorses—namely, adjuncts.

After the War Between the States, the picture of the American higher education landscape became even more cluttered as “state universities, land-grant colleges, technical institutes, and the old-time colleges” (Rudolph, 1962, p. 199) all competed for the same group of potential students. The press to subsidize student tuition, erect donated buildings, and seek philanthropic support fueled the exploitation of faculty. Benefactors wanted legacy opportunities that did not often include endowed chairs for faculty. As a result, America’s intellectuals either had to succumb to a life of poverty or escape to higher paid employment for survival. Today, it is the adjunct faculty who face the same dilemma.

The college crisis of the 1850s was microeconomic: the supply of colleges far exceeded the demand, and higher education was being given away at below-cost prices. Today, the demand is high, the supply seems endless, and the cost is prohibitive. What does higher education sell? What was and is its product?

Acknowledging Consumer Needs in the Competitive Marketplace

The Morrill Act, passed in 1862, spawned a new era in American higher education, for this enactment legislated the creation of the land-grant colleges. As a result, every state has at least one college “where the leading objective shall be, *without excluding other scientific or classical studies*, [emphasis added] to teach such branches of learning as are related to agriculture and the mechanic arts” (Rudolph, 1962, p. 252). This expansion of course offerings negatively affected faculty. For example, one professor in South Dakota was responsible for instruction in “German, bookkeeping, penmanship, orthography, political economy, United States constitution, and history [of] civilization [and] also gave farm-institute lectures on farm

accounts, managed the men's dormitory, and was steward of an undergraduate boarding club" (Rudolph, 1962, p. 262). This dramatic shift in coursework and faculty responsibilities at land-grant colleges legitimized the vocational and technical components of American higher education and opened up opportunities for those whose needs and interests were neither based in the classics nor dependent upon wealth.

About the same time as the land-grant colleges were established, another new focus of American higher education emerged—science and scientific inquiry. Exemplifying this effort, Yale University awarded the first three U.S. doctoral degrees in 1860. The belief of the time, explicated in 1879 by James B. Angell, president of the University of Michigan, was that “we need all the intelligence, all the trained minds we can have” (Rudolph, 1962, p. 279). In contrast with the focus on science, however, the period after the Civil War, one of previously unsurpassed prosperity, produced a crop of new students “who could afford to waste their own time and their father's money” (Rudolph, 1962, p. 289). Moreover, the available non-classical college programs and array of non-cohesive courses led to a student body lacking career direction and motivation. According to Rudolph (1962), “One of the most destructive, educational developments of the post-Civil War years, the elective curriculum, played the paradoxical role of both contributing to the motivational problem and keeping it from being worse than it was” (p. 290). The same problem was repeated in the 1970s and 1980s with relatively loose majors and seemingly infinite liberal education course options. In about 1990, for instance, I supervised a student teacher from Rutgers College whose preparation for teaching high school English was limited to an abundance of courses in Shakespeare—depth without breadth.

By the turn of the 19th century, even Yale, the staunchest supporter of the classical curriculum since 1828, gave it up in favor of electives. Rudolph commented, “The elective

principle moved the individual to the center of the educational universe and boldly asserted that all educated men need not know the same things” (p. 305). Because course selection in the elective system was consumer-driven—that is, based on student motivation and interest and not the decision of faculty—academic rigor increased, more able students attended colleges and universities, and the relationships between professors and students became friendly and facilitative rather than hostile and adversarial. This process of electives moved the U.S. higher education system from colleges to universities, from British- to German-based, and from apart from the greater society to a part of it. It is the elective system that “created the American university” (Rudolph, 1962, p. 305).

“In this day of unparalleled activity in college life, the institution which is not steadily advancing is certainly falling behind” (Rudolph, 1962, p. 329). True today, President Angell of the University of Michigan actually said these words in 1871 in response to the new need for colleges and universities to produce professional teachers, civil servants, and diplomats. Further, the distinction between “college” and “university” became blurred as “colleges changed their letterheads to read ‘university,’ . . . and the road to university purpose, function, or status was in no sense clearly defined” (Rudolph, 1962, p. 331). Similarly, in the 1990s as a cost-saving measure, the State of New Jersey dissolved the state’s Department of Higher Education, thereby disbanding any oversight agency for the state’s 56 colleges and universities. Within months, several of New Jersey’s public and private 4-year colleges hung out their “university” shingle.

American universities also resulted from the availability of public and private resources, the provision of a variety of curriculum designs, and the interest of public, private, and religious overseers. In contrast, the college, as a smaller institution, was perceived as “the lengthened shadow of its president” (Rudolph, 1962, p. 355). By the early 1900s, Progressivism had taken

hold, and the university's role, especially in Wisconsin, for example, was to serve the people and protect them from the "greed, privilege, and corrupting power of great wealth" (Rudolph, 1962, p. 363), the perceived domain of the colleges. Moreover, as it generally is today, the colleges were focusing on teaching; the universities, on research and publications.

The concerns about higher education raised today are the same as those of more than 150 years ago: (a) quality, (b) standards, and (c) excellence. Will higher education in the United States "serve the people" or "serve learning"—or somehow both (Rudolph, 1962, p. 221)? Then and now, the college decides what is "good" for the people who attend it and, as in any capitalistic marketplace, they are free to purchase—or not. As I have contended from the beginning, American higher education has always been consumer-driven, although not as generally consumer-focused or responsive. Who is responsible to the higher education consumer? Who sells the product? In the mid-1900s, the University of North Dakota, for instance, rewarded faculty for "effectiveness in public relations" (Rudolph, 1962, p. 422), and some college presidents held weekly or monthly meetings with students to discuss mutual concerns. Later, presidents raised money, and deans maintained the "collegiate and human values in an atmosphere of increasing scholarship and specialization" (Rudolph, 1962, p. 435). The current governance model employed by most institutions of higher education in the United States has been in place since 1916. In short, little has changed in higher education in terms of structure and general education curriculum in nearly a century. Students are older, faculty is more part-time, colleges and universities are larger, and technology enables different delivery, but the consumer culture continues to drive liberal education in the United States.

A Testament to the Consumer Culture

Historical evidence supports the response of the American citizenry to the product of higher education—college degrees. For example, Table 3 indicates the number of bachelor’s, master’s, and doctoral degrees offered since 1890 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). Currently, more than 2 million degrees are being awarded annually. Someone is buying what higher education is selling.

Table 3

Number of Earned Degrees Conferred: 1890-2006

Year	Number of Earned Degrees Conferred		
	Bachelor’s	Master’s	Doctoral
1890	6,853	1,135	126
1900	14,018	1,952	342
1910	22,687	2,541	409
1920	38,552	4,853	532
1930	83,085	13,834	1,447
1940	186,500	26,731	3,290
1950	433,734	58,210	6,633
1960	394,889	74,497	9,829
1970	839,730	230,509	32,107
1980	935,140	295,739	32,958
1990	1,094,538	337,168	39,294
2000	1,244,171	468,476	44,904
2006	1,485,242	594,065	56,067

I will now again address the four key questions I raised at the beginning of this paper. First, what is the product of higher education? Based on Table 3, I would say that the main product sold by higher education is credentialing in the form of earned degrees. More than 2 million students completed their purchase at the bachelor's, master's, or doctoral levels in 2006. Further, they earned their degrees in many different fields, as shown in Table 4, suggesting that a liberal education is readily available in the consumer marketplace, for many business, education, and engineering degree programs mandate general education requirements during the first 2 years of a baccalaureate program.

Second, who are the consumers? The primary consumers of higher education in the United States are students, about 17 million of them in 2006. They infuse about \$200 billion into the American higher education system each year and will continue to do so.

Third, who benefits? Certainly, the students who acquire the product—degrees and credentialing—are the primary beneficiaries of American higher education. Corporate America benefits from well-educated employees, many groomed for management. All levels of education benefit from trained teachers and administrators. Government and nonprofit organizations benefit from prepared social service workers, trained scientists, and technologically competent employees in a range of positions. The healthcare industry is also a main beneficiary of the American higher education system. Parents, spouses, children, friends, and other important people in the lives of the consumers of education earn bragging rights. As a case in point, my daughter is a recent graduate of the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, and she is completing her master's degree in counseling psychology at Pacifica Graduate Institute in Santa Barbara, California.

Table 4

Major Fields of Study for Earned Bachelor's Degrees Conferred: Selected Years from 1963-2006

Field of Study	1963		1970		1980		1990		2000		2006	
	<i>n</i>	%										
Business	53,684	11.9	115,396	13.7	200,521	21.4	249,165	22.8	263,515	21.2	318,042	21.4
Humanities	67,677	15.0	143,571	17.1	134,214	14.4	172,590	15.8	214,818	17.3	263,125	17.7
Social and Behavioral Sciences	78,902	17.5	193,511	23.0	141,581	15.1	183,762	16.8	201,681	16.2	292,380	19.7
Natural Sciences	51,615	11.5	81,894	9.8	78,017	8.3	70,104	6.4	88,955	7.1	104,266	7.0
Computer Science/Engineering	33,458	7.4	52,570	6.3	90,476	9.7	104,910	9.6	117,117	9.4	128,703	8.7
Education	102,796	22.8	176,307	21.0	108,074	11.6	110,807	10.1	105,458	8.5	107,238	7.2
Other	62,460	13.9	76,481	9.1	182,257	19.5	203,200	18.6	252,627	20.3	271,101	18.3

Finally, who pays? The U.S. government has been paying substantially for higher education over time—about \$93 million in the GI Bill alone immediately following World War II (Rudolph, 1962); however, it is the consumers, their spouses, and their parents who also make significant contributions in the form of tuition and fees. Foundations and government agencies offer grants, and wealthy philanthropists offer buildings, endowed chairs, scholarships, and sometimes operating funds. What alumni organization does not operate some kind of annual giving program? I recently attended my 40th reunion at Douglass College, the women's college of Rutgers University in New Jersey. At each reunion event, each class' contribution to the Douglass Annual Fund is loudly announced and applauded at the morning ceremonies.

Final Considerations

Folks like me, who graduated from a liberal arts college decades ago, often long for a return to the collegiate experience we had. We reminisce about the fun we had in the dormitories, the lifelong friendships we made in college, the weekend social life we relished, and, of course, the challenge of the academic studies we loved. What we long for was defined by Rudolph (1962) as the

collegiate way, . . . the notion that a curriculum, a library, a faculty, and students are not enough to make a college. It is an adherence to the residential scheme of things. It is respectful of quiet rural settings, dependent on dormitories, committed to dining halls, permeated by paternalism. It is what every American college has had or consciously rejected or lost or sought to recapture. (p. 87)

I believe that when we talk about retaining liberal education, we are really hoping to recapture the collegiate way that I, for one, so fondly recall. If this is indeed the case, we are living a pipe dream, not because of the consumer culture, but because the reality of the social and economic

world has changed. For one thing, the student population is aging; the average age of new students continues to move beyond the traditional 18-24 college age, and 38% are 25 years-old or older (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). Further, the student population at every level is exploding with more than 17 million of them at last count. Additionally, the student population must frequently work to support the tuition and other expenses of purchasing the higher education product; they may attend part-time rather than full-time as a result. In fact, 59% of students over 24 years of age work part-time (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009), while uncounted others work full-time.

If it is not the collegiate way, but the liberal education that we believe will somehow be damaged by the consumer culture, then we must examine the components and composition of the liberal education offered by our colleges in terms of the marketability of their particular liberal education. Colleges and universities have a product to sell, and like all products, liberal education must be packaged attractively and marketed through advertising and promotion. Market research helps, too, to identify the higher education needs of the population or clientele—the consumers—colleges and universities wish to attract and serve. The premise “If we build it, they will come” has not held up in American higher education since the establishment of Harvard in 1636; yet, many professors, administrators, and governing boards continue to believe that common statement.

What does hold up and what must occur if liberal education is to be compatible with the consumer culture is that higher education must admit that it is a business and behave like one. That means that colleges and universities must clearly identify the differentiating components of their product—courses and degrees—through clarification of their mission. They must then identify their consumers and promote their product in a manner befitting the *Zeitgeist* of the

institution. As a case in point, one question I asked the women who participated in the study I conducted through the University of Denver for my doctorate in higher education administration, *The Role of the Women's College in the Professional Development of Women*, was how they chose the women's or coeducational college they attended. The number one response was the reputation of the college or university regardless of its actual quality; therefore, colleges and universities must increase their name recognition and expand their reputations to upgrade their perceived quality. As a result of such efforts, the colleges and universities will benefit from more students and, therefore, more revenue. Students will benefit from a clearly articulated mission that is reflected in a high quality product. Society will benefit from two million well-educated individuals who are annually released and/or reintegrated into the workforce with brand new bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees. In some sense, we all pay for this through sales and income taxes that become state and federal grants and subsidies for American higher education, but then, we also earn the bragging rights of a college and university system unique in the world that allows the compatibility of the consumer culture with a liberal education.

References

- Arnould, E. J., & Thompson, C. J. (2005). Consumer culture theory (CCT): Twenty years of research. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 31(4), 868-883.
- Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU). (2009). *What is liberal education?* Retrieved May 29, 2009, from http://www.aacu.org/leap/What_is_Liberal_Education.cfm
- Benton, T. H. (2008, August 1). On stupidity. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved August 25, 2008, from <http://chronicle.com/jobs/news/2008/08/2008080101c.htm>
- Bowen, H. R. (1980). *The costs of higher education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Nevada Department of Employment, Training and Rehabilitation. (2009). *Nevada's largest employers: 4th quarter 2008*. Retrieved May 28, 2009, from <http://www.nevadaworkforce.com/?PAGEID=67&SUBID=169>
- Planty, M., Hussar, W., Snyder, T., Provasnik, S., Kena, G., Dinkes, R., et al. (2008). *The condition of education 2008* (NCES 2008-031). Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education.
- Rudolph, F. (1962). *The American college and university: A history*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Tewksbury, D. G. (1965). *The founding of American colleges and universities before the Civil War*. New York: Archon Books.
- U.S. Census Bureau. (2009). *Census data*. Retrieved May 20, 2009, from <http://www.census.gov>