

What Is College For?

**Presented to the Waikiki Rotary Club
by Dr. Kent M. Keith
President, Pacific Rim Christian University
Honolulu, Hawaii
October 19, 2016**

[Note: The text below is based on the PowerPoint slides used in the presentation.]

+++

Thank you for the opportunity to share some ideas with you today about higher education. The question I will address is: What is college for?

We have a long and diverse history of institutions of higher education. It started with religious institutions. For two centuries, almost all colleges in America were founded by churches or religious orders primarily to train clergy. The first one was Harvard in 1636. Religious higher education is alive and well today. In Hawaii, we have Chaminade University, BYU-Hawaii with ties to Utah, Wayland Baptist University with ties to Texas, and Pacific Rim Christian University.

In 1862, the Morrill Land Grant Colleges Act was passed, by which land was granted to states to establish public universities. These colleges were designed to support economic development. The University of Hawaii was established in 1907 as a land grant college. UH has done a lot of research in agriculture, renewable energy, astronomy, and ocean resources.

The number of colleges continued to grow. During the 19th century, a number of colleges were endowed or established by industrialists and philanthropists: Vanderbilt in 1873, Johns Hopkins in 1876, Stanford in 1885, and Carnegie Mellon in 1900.

By the late 19th century, the German university, featuring advanced research, came to America in the form of the graduate school. Graduate schools were added to many colleges, turning them into “universities.” The word “university” today is used when an institution has a graduate program.

Undergraduate colleges and graduate schools have different purposes. Undergraduate colleges are focused on teaching, with an emphasis on liberal arts

or general education plus career-prep majors. The focus is on the dissemination of knowledge. Graduate schools emphasize research and training students for specific professions. The focus is on the creation of knowledge and professional training. Famous universities may not do a good job of teaching undergraduates, because their focus and the source of their prestige is the graduate school.

The community college movement grew in the 1960s. There are now 1,166 community colleges in the United States. Community colleges are educating more than half of all U.S. undergrads. Since 1901, 100 million people have attended a community college. The focus is on vocational programs and training students for local jobs. They are very accessible; many have open enrollment. Community colleges are making the American dream more real for students of all ages and backgrounds.

In recent decades, we have seen an increase in for-profit institutions that sell shares on stock exchanges. During 2010-2011, for-profit institutions enrolled 12% of all college students, a total of 2.4 million students. For-profits received \$32 billion in federal grants and loans for their students in 2009-2010. The concern is that graduation rates have been low and student loan default rates have been high.

Recently, enrollments at for-profit institutions have significantly declined. The University of Phoenix claimed a peak enrollment of 600,000 students in 2010, but its numbers declined to 155,600 by May 2016. More than 100 campuses have closed. The university's overall six-year graduation rate in 2007 was 16 percent, which compared with the national average of 55 percent, and 40 percent for community colleges. In 2008, the University of Phoenix was the top recipient of student financial aid funds, receiving nearly \$2.48 billion in one year. The university's students owe more than \$35 billion in student loan debt, the most of any U.S. college. The loan default rate for students was 19%; the number of students in default was 45,123.

ITT Technical Institute was a for-profit institute with 40,000 students at approximately 130 campuses in 38 states. The student tuition ranged from \$45,000 to \$85,000. According to a *Time* magazine report, ITT Tech's default rate was 22%, with 11,260 students in default. In 2015, 31 campuses and more than 400 programs were not meeting accreditation standards for student retention. In 2016 the accrediting agency issued a "show cause" why ITT should not lose accreditation. On August 25, 2016, the US Department of Education banned ITT Tech from enrolling students who receive federal aid. All ITT Tech campuses were

closed as of September 6, 2016, and ITT Tech filed for bankruptcy on September 16.

Comprehensive workplace programs are sometimes referred to as “universities.” By 2001, there were more than 2,000 corporate “universities” including Walt Disney, Boeing, Motorola, and McDonald’s—which has “Hamburger University.” These “universities” do not grant degrees.

So, today we have religious and private colleges and universities, public Land Grant universities, public community colleges, for-profit universities; and corporate “universities.” All this means that there are lots of choices for students of all ages and backgrounds— and that’s a good thing.

There has been dramatic growth in the number of degrees awarded. From 1910 to 2009, the number of Bachelor’s degrees awarded increased from 37,200 to 1.6 million per year. Master’s degrees increased from 2,100 to 657,000, and Ph.D.’s increased from 440 to 67,000. In 1940, only 4.6% of the U.S. population had a Bachelor’s degree. Today, 25% of the population has a Bachelor’s degree. Also, 11% of the population has a Master’s degree.

So we have a variety of institutions of higher education, and dramatic growth in the number of students who earn degrees from them. That brings us to my question: what is college for?

Most people say the purpose of college is to get a good job and make more money. Recently, the focus has shifted to getting the *first* job, right after graduation. Students and their parents prefer majors that will make students immediately employable.

Certainly, students need to get jobs and make their way in the world. Unfortunately, this focus on jobs has shifted attention away from liberal arts programs. States are cutting money from subjects that don’t train students for a specific job right out of college.

This is not as practical as it looks. Focusing on the first job is not that practical for two reasons. First, the job market changes quickly. The job the students prepares for may no longer be there by the time he or she graduates. Second, a student may simply not be able to get a job in his or her major. Data suggest that half of all college graduates *do not have a job that relates to their*

college major. They will have many jobs during their lifetimes, so even if the first job relates to their college major, the other jobs may not.

So if we want to be practical, we should focus on transferable skills that can be used in *any* job. Students need to learn to think critically, write, speak, organize, solve problems, conduct projects, work with others, serve on teams, and lead teams. These “thinking” and “relating” skills can be learned in a liberal arts environment.

Most important, students need to learn how to learn, so they can continue to learn throughout their careers. Organizations will be hiring not just for what people know, but for *their ability to learn*, and learn quickly. On-the-job training will be as important as the initial college degree.

In his book, *In Defense of Liberal Education*, Fareed Zakaria said that “learning and re-learning, tooling and retooling are at the heart of the modern economy.” He quoted Dr. Drew Faust, President of Harvard University, who said that a liberal education should give people the skills “that will help them get ready for their sixth job, not their first job.”

Another reason to not focus on a major geared to your first job is that you may narrow your focus too soon and may not learn about other abilities and interests you might have. Most students will live another 50 to 60 years after they graduate from college. They should take time during college to explore what they are good at and what they enjoy, so they can look for work in those areas. They can do that in a liberal arts program.

We know that people are more productive when they are intrinsically motivated. Meaningful work is an intrinsic motivator. When you find what you love to do, and can do it well, and have a job that allows you to do it every day, you simply perform better. Self-discovery during a liberal arts education can lead to better lifetime performance.

Looking ahead, we know that computers are doing more and more things that we thought only humans could do. However, they are less likely to take over jobs that require a lot of human interaction. People still want to interact with other *people*.

Geoffrey Colvin is an author, broadcaster, and Senior Editor-at-Large for *Fortune* magazine. He wrote a book titled, *Humans Are Underrated: What High*

Achievers Know That Brilliant Machines Never Will. In his book, Colvin looks at the trend of technology displacing more jobs than it creates, and the ways people will create value for their organizations and their careers in the changing economy. He says that social interaction skills are becoming the key because there are some things that people want to do with other people, not computers. The most valuable workers will therefore be relationship workers. Colvin says: “Now, increasingly, you have to be good at being a person.”

Colvin says that being good at being a person requires empathy—the ability to understand what someone else is feeling, and then act in an appropriate way in response. This is the basis for every significant relationship. Employers around the world want more employees who can empathize and connect with customers.

Colvin says that the importance of empathy shows up on team performance, not only in business or sports but also in armed conflict. The Army found that training soldiers in realistic large-scale simulations made a positive difference. It not only improved the soldiers’ technical skills, it improved their empathy—their ability to understand each other, and coordinate with each other as an effective team.

An example is the battle of 73 Easting which occurred during Desert Storm in 1991. Nine U.S. tanks were ordered to advance East to identify the positions of the Iraqi Republican Guard. The tank leader was 28-year-old Capt. MacMaster. One of the tanks drove over an Iraqi observation bunker, and the fight was on. The nine U.S. tanks were outnumbered by a large Iraqi force that was dug in.

How did it turn out? The nine U.S. tanks destroyed 57 Iraqi tanks, 28 infantry fighting vehicles, 11 light-armored tracked vehicles, 45 trucks, and 3 air defense artillery pieces. The U. S. suffered no casualties. The battle lasted only 23 minutes. The U.S. tanks only stopped shooting when there was nothing left to shoot.

What were the reasons for this extraordinary victory? The technology was a reason— U.S. tanks were better than the Soviet tanks used by the Iraqis. But another reason was the realistic training the U.S. soldiers received, which trumped the technology. Capt. McMaster said the most important thing about the training was that the men learned to work together, and to have confidence in each other. In short, empathy made the difference.

Research suggests that the key factor in team effectiveness is social sensitivity; the willingness to listen to each other. Social sensitivity enhances “idea flow.” The best team members may not be the best knowledge workers, but they are the best *relationship* workers. Empathy is the foundation for relationships skills, social sensitivity, and effective teamwork.

If empathy is so important, where does it come from? It can come from our experiences with our family and friends, and it can come from our faith or philosophy. A broad knowledge of human beings and the human condition can help. You can get that in a good liberal arts program— including literature, art, music, sociology, psychology, anthropology, science, and religion. Students at Pacific Rim Christian University, my university, also learn about the human condition by studying the rich diversity of stories in the Bible and participating in community service.

So liberal arts education is practical because it can help students to learn skills they can use throughout their careers. It can help them discover what they enjoy and are good at, so they will be motivated and perform well in their work. It can help them learn about people and develop empathy so they will be good at providing things people want from other people, not computers.

College should not just be about preparing for work. College should also be about preparing *for life*. A liberal education can provide a broader foundation for life and help students understand what it means to be human. It can also expose students to fields that can affect their *quality* of life— music, art, history, science, philosophy, and religion.

Preparing for life means preparing students for life with others. After all, we have many roles in life beyond the workplace. We not only want to be good workers, we also want to be good sons and daughters, brothers and sisters, husbands and wives, parents, friends, citizens, and community members. We need a bigger view of life, beyond work, and a liberal education can give us that bigger view.

What, then, is college for? First, it should be preparation for a lifetime of work. Students should learn transferable skills, including empathy, and they should learn how to learn. Second, it should be preparation for a fulfilling life. Students should discover their values, identify and develop their gifts, and learn what gives meaning and joy to their lives. Third, it should be preparation for life with others. Students should learn about other roles they are likely to have in life, beyond work,

in families, friendships, and communities. In short, students should learn that life is more than having a job, and being human is more than having a skill.

Thank you!