

The Effects of Liberal Arts Experiences on Liberal Arts Outcomes*

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Abstract

Despite scholars' praise of liberal arts education as a model form, very little research has examined the actual impact of liberal arts education on learning outcomes. Using data from the first phase of the Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education, we found, net of student background characteristics and institution attended, liberal arts experiences had a positive effect on four of six liberal arts outcomes, including leadership, inclination toward lifelong learning, psychological well-being, and intercultural effectiveness.

Background and Purpose

Since Aristotle differentiated “liberal” from “illiberal” education over 2000 years ago, scholars have praised liberal arts education as a model form, especially in the United States. Advocates of liberal arts education claim that it produces “broad and deep learning,” allowing students to acquire “a rich fund of meaningful knowledge” (AALE, 2003, ¶ 7). Unfortunately, despite its long-held status and assumed benefits, researchers have not carefully examined either the structure or impact of liberal arts education until recently. In 2005, Pascarella, Wolniak, Seifert, Cruce, and Blaich analyzed a combination of teaching practices and institutional conditions that capture the basic environmental elements of many liberal arts colleges. These practices and conditions promoted student development on a wide range of liberal education outcomes, from valuing literacy to critical thinking, and effectively promoted these outcomes regardless of the kind of institution.

The Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education was developed to extend these findings by enriching the range of measured outcomes, institutional conditions, and teaching practices. The basic research question that guides our work is the following: After controlling for an array of background characteristics and institution types, to what extent do students’ liberal arts experiences influence liberal arts outcomes?

Methods

The sample consisted of students from four institutions involved in the pilot phase of the Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education. These institutions represented three states and differed in Carnegie classification and selectivity.

We randomly sampled and invited students from each institution to participate in the study. Aiming for 200 students from each institution evenly distributed across years in school,

we oversampled students of color at institutions where they did not comprise ten percent of the undergraduate population. We developed a sample weighting algorithm to adjust for sample bias by gender and year in school for each institution.

We collected data in three phases. First, students provided demographic information either online or by mail. Students then received a paper copy of the college experiences questionnaire measuring a range of in- and out-of-classroom experiences and the openness to diversity and positive attitude toward literacy scales. Finally, students completed one of two assessment batteries during a monitored session. We used this form of matrix sampling among the assessments to reduce the students' assessment fatigue. 723 students completed the college experiences survey and 601 completed the matrix of assessment instruments.

The "liberal arts experiences" scale was our independent variable of interest. Based on the empirically-vetted liberal arts experiences variable created by Pascarella and colleagues (2005), we derived this scale from a range of student reports regarding campus interactions with faculty, peers, and the overall academic climate. To control for confounding influences, we included students' demographic characteristics, academic ability and aspirations, high school involvement, and a series of dummy variables representing institution attended to the models.

Drawing from the breadth of literature on liberal arts education, we selected outcomes believed to be conceptually and theoretically related to liberal arts education (Center of Inquiry in the Liberal Arts, 2006). We estimated the effects of students' liberal arts experiences on the following outcomes: moral reasoning, reflective judgment, leadership, inclination for lifelong learning, intercultural effectiveness, and psychological well-being. The paper provides complete variable definitions.

Using OLS regression, we estimated total and direct effects models predicting liberal arts outcomes. In the total effects model, we regressed student background characteristics and institutional dummy variables on the outcomes. The direct effects model simply included the liberal arts experience variable to the previous regression specification. This allowed us to examine the amount of additional variance in the liberal arts outcomes explained by students' liberal arts experiences.

Results

Overall, net of confounding influences, we found students' liberal arts experiences positively affected four of the six liberal arts outcomes. Adding the liberal arts experience variable significantly changed the amount of explained variation in the liberal arts outcomes from slightly over 1% to more than 14%.

We found liberal arts experiences to positively affect leadership. Moreover, we found significant positive effects of liberal arts experiences on both measures of inclination for lifelong learning—the need for cognition and positive attitude toward literacy. Students' liberal arts experiences also positively affected both measures of intercultural effectiveness, but to differing degrees with a stronger influence found on the openness to diversity scale. Finally, liberal arts experiences positively affected all of the well-being dimensions. Interestingly, we found liberal arts experiences did not affect moral reasoning or reflective judgment.

Discussion

Pascarella and colleagues (2005) found that while merely attending a liberal arts college inconsistently influenced cognitive outcomes, students' liberal arts experiences dependably predicted gains in many of these areas. In the current study, we further tested the construct validity of the liberal arts experiences variable by examining whether it predicted outcomes

theoretically associated with the liberal arts. Given significant positive relationships on four of the six outcomes, our results suggest the liberal arts experience variable is a valid construct.

It is rare for a student to experience the campus environment in isolated segments (i.e. interaction with faculty or peers, the academic challenge of the institution). These dimensions of the environment overlap and blend together. We suggest this is a key characterization of liberal arts education. Conceptually speaking, what sets the liberal arts experience variable apart from other “good practice” benchmarks (Chickering & Gamson, 1987) is its attempt to capture the holistic and seamless nature of this learning environment with a single scale.

Despite the preliminary nature of the findings, the connection between liberal arts experiences and liberal arts outcomes is noteworthy. Consistent with previous research (Astin, 1993; Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005, Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005), our findings support the notion that an institutional focus on good teaching and student engagement in an active, collaborative, and supportive environment positively affects student learning. We believe this is good news for postsecondary education in that any institution, centered on student learning, can create a culture that maximizes liberal arts experiences and thus, the development of liberal arts outcomes for all students.

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