

The Effectiveness of a Liberal Arts Education

By

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Dedication

I dedicate this work to my students who have inspired me for many years. You have cheered me on and shown me unflagging support in this season. I dedicate this work to my family who have believed in me even when I did not believe in myself. You have given me confidence to pursue my dreams no matter the obstacles. I dedicate this work to my friends who have demonstrated limitless patience towards me in a season where I have not been able to be the friend that they deserve. You have shown me such grace in loving me well in a season where I have not always been able to be there for you in the way that I wish I could. Lastly, I dedicate this work to my person who has loved me throughout this process without an ounce of ego. You have loved me, believed in me, and carried me through this season. I could not have achieved any of this without you.

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Abstract

This qualitative research study aimed to investigate graduates' perceptions of their liberal arts education. The study considered the perceptions of graduates spanning from 2010-2013 from a private liberal arts university in Northeast Tennessee. Specifically, this study sought to understand whether or not liberal arts graduates feel prepared for the workforce and life because of their liberal arts degree. The qualitative data resulting from personal interviews was then coded to allow for identification of global and sub-themes. It is the hope that these themes will inform the strategies of liberal arts institutions as they seek to increase enrollment in response to continued declines.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

A liberal arts degree was once the hallmark of Western education. At the start of the twentieth century, liberal arts schools accounted for two-thirds of college students; however, estimates at the start of the twenty-first century suggest fewer than two percent of students attending college are enrolled at a liberal arts institution (Gitter et al., 2018). Liberal arts educators propose hypotheses for this decline in liberal arts education. Thompson (2015) suggests the decline is the result of political correctness and an abandoning of conservative ideals. Whereas Kimball (2015) suggests that the philosophy of a liberal arts education does not align with corporate values and thus is no longer relevant. In contrast, the Community College Research Center reports that students at the community college level are still pursuing liberal arts degrees or, at minimum, are still showing great interest in those courses (Pippins et al., 2019).

While liberal arts institutions have been a staple of education for centuries, the defining qualities of these institutions have yet to be clearly specified. The Community College Research Center (Pippins et al., 2019) supports their claim that liberal arts are not in decline based on the predominance of humanities and arts courses in community colleges; however, the mere option to take these types of courses does not constitute a liberal arts education. A foundational voice in the debate of liberal arts, Breneman (1994) defines liberal arts as follows:

Educationally, liberal arts colleges award the Bachelor of Arts degree, are residential, primarily enroll full-time students between 18 and 24 years of age and limit the number of majors to roughly twenty to twenty-four fields in the arts, humanities, languages, social sciences, and physical sciences. They rarely enroll more than 2,500 students, and most enroll between 800 and 1,800 students. (p. 12)

Being a liberal arts institution entails a “distinctively different approach to higher education” (Milligan University, 2023). For liberal arts universities, knowledge is meant to be acquired, created, and applied. This perspective partners nicely with Humphreys (2014), who suggests that a liberal arts education is essential in the creation of responsible and informed citizens. Humphreys (2014) writes “the liberal arts are essential to building our nation’s intellectual capital and the global leadership that comes along with it” (p. 66).

Beyond creating informed global citizens, a liberal arts education often aims to create servant leaders. Littlejohn and Evans (2006) make the following claim: “[Liberal arts schools] were intended to produce individuals who were skilled, lifelong, independent learners having no further need of tutelage and who, through their continued self-directed learning, would become wise and eloquent servants in their societies” (p. 29). Littlejohn and Evans (2006) go on to argue that the hallmark of a liberal arts education is humility. The student educated by the liberal arts tradition recognizes all that they have yet to learn or are incapable of understanding—producing a mindset of humility (Littlejohn & Evans, 2006).

Advocates of a liberal arts approach to education have argued that a liberal education increases an individual’s chance of success (Humphreys & Kelly, 2014). Gitter, MacDonald, and Greenleaf (2018) support this claim by sharing that graduates from liberal arts universities are twice as likely to attain a Ph.D. Likewise, liberal arts institutions, despite their size, “produce a disproportionate share of leaders” (Gitter et al., 2018). A quarter of Nobel Laureates have received their undergraduate degrees from liberal arts schools, and 12 US presidents have graduated from such institutions. These statistics illustrate that while small, the liberal arts produce successful graduates.

Similarly, Littlejohn and Evans (2006) argue that the reason for liberal arts graduates' success is because of the transferability of their skills, stating, "Liberally educated people, whose intellectual skills are transferable to the learning of any subject or craft, are increasingly important in an economy in which the average adult changes careers multiple times over the course of his life" (p. 22). This transferability makes liberal arts graduates more appealing to employers. Strauss (2023) shares the perspective of Michael S. Roth, the president of Wesleyan University, who states,

A pragmatic liberal arts education promises to engage with issues that students will have to deal with beyond their university years; it's more ambitious than a short-term training program. The jobs of the future and the problems confronting our world today cannot be tackled by technical specialization alone. Environmental degradation, artificial intelligence, public health, increasing inequality, international public tensions—these are complex areas that demand the kind of holistic thinking characteristic of liberal education.

Guth (2020) mirrors Roth's sentiments sharing that liberal arts graduates are adaptable. These graduates can think creatively, analyze well, and communicate effectively. These skills are needed by employers seeking workers with problem-solving skills. Because of the desirability of liberal arts graduates, Humphreys (2014) reports that liberal arts graduates can close the earnings gap with professional and pre-professional graduates. According to Hart Research Associates (2013), 93% of employers are more concerned with a candidate's ability to think critically, communicate well, and problem-solve than their actual degree. Likewise, in an article from the *Business Mirror* titled "Yes, Employers Do Value Liberal Arts Degrees" (2019), 80% of employers report preferring students with a strong liberal arts foundation.

All of these arguments in favor of a liberal arts education are captured by Watson and McConnell (2018). In an extensive study with employers and hiring managers, they found that the skill set of an applicant is of greater value than their major, citing previously mentioned skills such as communication and critical thinking.

Statement of the Problem

In light of the many attractive features of a liberal arts degree, one might be surprised by its continued decline. As mentioned, at the start of the twenty-first century, less than two percent of students were enrolled at a liberal arts institution (Gitter et al., 2018). Additionally, liberal arts universities were hit harder by the Covid-19 pandemic than their competitors, with some schools experiencing a five percent decline in enrollment (Nietzel, 2020).

However, the Covid-19 pandemic cannot entirely be blamed for the decline of liberal arts education. As illustrated by the findings of Gitter, MacDonald, and Greenleaf (2018), liberal arts schools have been experiencing a drastic decline for years. Thompson (2015) argues that this decline results from political correctness and an abandoning of conservative ideals, explaining that a liberal arts education is defined by a “quest for knowledge and truth.” He argues that modern-day higher education institutions are no longer concerned with this quest. Rather their focus on modern science, technology, and liberal individualism has led to an abandoning of liberal arts philosophy.

In contrast, others theorize that the liberal arts have moved from the Golden Age to the Bronze Age (Kimball, 2015). In this Bronze Age of education, Kimball claims universities are more concerned with pursuing “their financial self-interest at the expense of academic values” (2015). This cynical view of higher education cites greed as the primary cause of the decline. As

previously mentioned, the values of the liberal arts are the “most difficult to reconcile with corporate values” (Kimball, 2015).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to investigate graduates’ perceptions of their liberal arts education. Specifically, this study seeks to understand whether or not liberal arts graduates feel prepared for the workforce and life because of their liberal arts degree. This qualitative data will inform the strategies of liberal arts institutions as they seek to increase enrollment in response to continued declines.

As previously mentioned, fewer than two percent of college students are enrolled at a liberal arts institution (Gitter et al., 2018). In 2020, *Forbes* reported that liberal arts institutions were hit hardest by the Covid-19 pandemic, resulting in the loss of critical personnel (Nietzel, 2020). According to Docking and Curton (2015), if this downward decline continues the country will lose one of its strongest educational assets.

The hope is that this research will provide data for liberal arts schools to consider in their enrollment efforts. As already established, a liberal arts education is important in producing well-rounded citizens (Humphreys, 2014). Additionally, liberal arts institutions produce a disproportionate number of leaders (Gitter et al., 2018). Liberal arts schools are producing graduates with impressive communication, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills, all qualities highlighted by Watson and McConnell (2018) as being of the highest importance to employers and hiring managers. Based upon these claims, the necessity of liberal arts institutions is well established. By understanding past graduates’ experiences, liberal arts schools can shape marketing strategies for the future, ensuring that the liberal arts continue to thrive, producing global citizens.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework upon which this research will be built originates with George Herbert Mead and the theory of functionalism. According to Mead, intelligent human behavior is inherently social (Troyer, 1946). Mankind lives life with common understandings, and these understandings are only achieved through social discourse.

A liberal arts philosophy of education relies heavily on this social discourse. The founders of the liberal arts philosophy argued that such an approach to education would produce good, global, moral citizens (Humphreys, 2014). This idea that social discourse and constant communication will shape one's understanding of the world will undergird the entirety of this study. Not only do proponents of the liberal arts hope to see their students become global citizens committed to social discourse, but they also seek to understand the reality of the outcomes of such a degree in the wake of a decline in liberal arts enrollment. Will a liberal arts degree truly prepare students for success in the workforce and in society at large regardless of their fields of study? Seeking to answer this question aligns with the tenets of Mead's theory as proponents of the liberal arts continue to engage in social discourse seeking to truly understand the reality of life for their graduates.

Research Questions

Does a liberal arts education prepare students to be successful in the workforce?

Do liberal arts graduates gain anything from their educational experience that they would have otherwise missed?

Significance of the Study

Ferrall (2011) speaks to the integration of the liberal arts in society's understanding of what it is to be educated stating, "embedded in the noun education is the implication of liberal

education” (p. 8). He goes on to say that when someone is described as an educated individual, others do not think of someone who possesses a vocational skill or trade. When someone is described as educated, they are considered well-rounded with good communication skills and the ability to think critically and problem solve.

As previously mentioned, however, the liberal arts have seen a drastic decline in recent decades (Kimball, 2015; Thompson, 2015). While some may see this shift as a healthy response to the times, proponents of liberal arts education recognize the far-reaching effects such a decrease will have on society. Liberal arts institutions produce global citizens, with many rising to the most celebrated and prominent roles in society (Humphreys, 2014; Gitter et al., 2018). For example, a quarter of Nobel Laureates are liberal arts graduates, and 12 US Presidents have graduated from liberal arts institutions (Gitter et al., 2018). Likewise, the Hart Research Associates (2013) report that 93% of employers consider skills such as communication, critical thinking, and problem-solving over a degree. Additionally, in an article from the *Business Mirror* titled “Yes, Employers Do Value Liberal Arts Degrees” (2019), 80% of employers report preferring students with a strong liberal arts foundation.

These findings illustrate the important role that liberal arts graduates serve in society. By providing clarification on the perceptions of these graduates, this study can provide insight into strategies for responding to the decline in liberal arts. By understanding the attitudes of graduates, liberal arts schools can better learn how to market the education they are offering. This study does not seek to see a change in the philosophy of liberal arts education. Rather, this study hopes to determine new and engaging ways to promote the liberal arts to prospective students, highlighting the strengths of a liberal arts education.

Ferrall (2011) describes a liberal arts education with one word – intimacy. Liberal arts schools are uniquely dedicated to instruction. With a professor’s priority being teaching rather than research at a liberal arts institution, the focus can remain fixed on student learning. Ferrall (2011) goes on to quote the Pew Charitable Trust’s Higher Education Roundtable stating,

Architecturally and philosophically, the liberal arts college embodies the ideal of learning as an act of community, in which students and faculty come together to explore and extend the foundations of knowledge. The intimacy of the residential setting, the emphasis placed on teaching, the celebration of the liberal arts as the foundation for a lifetime of learning—all define the ideal form of scholarly purpose and endeavor in undergraduate institutions. (p. 14)

According to Ferrall (2011), society cannot afford to lose a liberal arts philosophy of education, and students cannot afford to lose an opportunity to engage in this type of education.

Additionally, the job market cannot afford to lose such qualified liberal arts graduates (Ferrall, 2011). This study will work towards understanding the true role of liberal arts and what must be done if it is to be maintained.

Definition of Terms

The following terms were used in this study.

Humanities: According to the Department of Defense (2022), a humanities curriculum is characterized by an “integrated study of history, literature, language, philosophy, the visual arts, theater, dance, and music.” Additionally, a humanities program should emphasize “critical thinking, creativity, and rights and responsibilities of the individual in society.” Simply put, humanities considers the question – What does it mean to be human?

Liberal Arts Education: While liberal arts institutions frequently share common demographic qualities, for the purposes of this study the term liberal arts education has been defined upon the basis of philosophy. Pippins, Belfield, and Bailey (2019) refer to the liberal arts as “the study and interpretation of languages, literature, and modes of inquiry.” Additionally, Roth, as quoted by Strauss (2023) in *The Washington Post*, shares that a liberal arts education combines acquisition of knowledge with understanding. A liberal arts education entails integration of a student’s intended area of study with courses on art, communication, composition, history, religion, science, and sociology with the objective of producing global citizens equipped to solve real-world problems.

Success: The meaning of success is often personal; however, for the purposes of this study, a definition of success had to be created upon which participants could consider their success. In its most basic form, success implies the completion of a goal. More specifically, this study will define success as follows: a feeling of achievement and satisfaction knowing that one is a good global citizen.

Global Citizen: An individual who actively seeks to promote the good of humanity striving for an understanding of the world which promotes service, critical thinking, good communication, and problem solving.

Limitations of the Study

The following limitations have been placed upon this study.

- This is not a comparative study. This study is solely interested in identifying the strengths of a liberal arts education.

- All qualitative data was collected from graduates of a private, Christian university in Northeast Tennessee. While the selected university is a Christian liberal arts university, the focus has remained on its liberal arts foundation rather than its Christian worldview.
- Since all qualitative data was collected from graduates of a small liberal arts university, it is impossible to differentiate between what findings are due to a liberal arts education and which are due to a small learning environment.
- Only graduates between the years of 2010 and 2013 were sampled.

Organization of the Study

This study has been divided into five chapters. Chapter One serves as an introduction detailing a statement of the problem, the purpose of the study, the theoretical framework, overarching research questions, the significance of the study, definition of terms, and limitations. Chapter Two encompasses relevant literature for the overall framework of a liberal arts education and considers the following: the philosophy and history of liberal arts education, the expected outcomes of a liberal arts education, the perceptions of a liberal arts education, the evolution of American higher education, and the decline and current status of the liberal arts. Chapter Three presents the qualitative procedures and methodology employed. The results of this qualitative research are presented in Chapter Four, and Chapter Five serves as a culminating summary including a summary of findings, discussions, conclusions, and recommendations.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

This research aims to investigate graduates' perceptions of their liberal arts education. As such, Chapter Two provides an in-depth overview of the philosophy and history of liberal arts education, the expected outcomes of a liberal arts education, students' perceptions of a liberal arts education, and the evolution of American higher education coupled with the decline of liberal arts education. Additionally, the theoretical framework of functionalism upon which this research has been designed will be referenced throughout this Literature Review.

While much research has been conducted regarding the outcomes of a liberal arts education and the recent decline in the liberal arts, very little research exists that analyzes graduates' perceptions in the wake of this decline. Access to knowledge of these perceptions would enable liberal arts institutions to expand their marketing strategies to counteract such declines. For this reason, the focus of this Literature Review will be on the history and philosophy of liberal arts education and how attitudes toward the liberal arts have seemingly shifted, leading to a drastic decline in enrollment.

Philosophy and History of Liberal Arts Education

What is a liberal arts education? The term liberal arts education arises from the Roman author Cicero with the implication that *liberalis* implies freedom from slavery (Rose, 2015). Thus, a liberal education at one time signified a more legal connotation with the freedom of movement. Augustine would adopt this terminology as well, yet he would suggest that *liberalis* implies freedom from sin. As this philosophy of education has taken root in society, it has come to denote the "freest human activity [of] metaphysical inquiry" (Rose, 2015). The term art derives from *techne*, which implies excellence in production. Aquinas would go on to suggest

that in light of these two terms working together that a liberal art is “a work that is directly a product of reason itself” (as cited in Rose, 2015).

Michael Roth, in an interview with Valerie Strauss (2023) for *The Washington Post*, shares the rich educational tradition of the liberal arts stating:

This form of learning...combines the acquisition of specific skills (such as literacy and numeracy) with an understanding of how those skills fit into broad contexts. Rather than being just trained how to be a cog in a machine, you are taught to understand how machines work within the systems in which they (and you) are embedded.

Roth goes on to assert that the democratic history of the United States is directly linked to a liberal arts philosophy of education, sharing that a critical component of the liberal arts is learning how to listen to those with differing views (Strauss, 2023).

The history of the liberal arts educational philosophy adheres to Mead’s theory of functionalism (Troyer, 1946). Mead considers all human behavior inherently social. Additionally, Mead asserts that the common understandings that govern human life have only been achieved through social discourse. The idea of social discourse is prevalent throughout the liberal arts as seen in its history and even into its very philosophy.

What exactly is the philosophy of a liberal arts education? Is Roth’s (Strauss, 2023) philosophy all that different from the original philosophy of liberal arts education? Historically, the liberal arts have included seven disciplines: grammar, dialectic (i.e., logic), rhetoric, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music (Littlejohn & Evans, 2006). These disciplines were approached as an extended conversation by the Greeks with the intent of creating self-directed lifelong learners. Rose (2015) highlights the historical philosophy of the liberal arts by sharing that “the liberal disciplines train students to perceive the immanent rational order of creation.” In

other terms, the liberal arts equip students to practice abstraction and reason – necessary components of philosophical contemplation. In this way, a liberal arts education does not merely allow one to form one’s mind but also to know one’s mind. The founders of the liberal arts philosophy would assert that such a discipline would serve as a moral education (Rose, 2015).

Benedict Ashley, as quoted by Rose (2015), asserts the following, “The education of the liberally-educated man will equip him for the marketplace and the forum.” Godwin and Altbach (2016) describe the philosophy of a liberal arts education as the ability “to empower learners with a mind and skill set that enables them to be critical members of society prepared to address complexity, diversity, and change.” This mirrors the philosophy of Socrates and Aristotle who were proponents for the examined life and reflective citizenship. Additionally, Martha Nussbaum (1997) describes those who are liberally educated as those who have been freed from habit and custom, allowing them to function as sensitive and alert citizens.

Contemporary liberal institutions continue to cite Greek and Western traditions as the foundations for their schools. Godwin and Altbach (2016) illustrate the difference in philosophy of liberal arts schools and other universities by highlighting the differences between a multidisciplinary curriculum and an interdisciplinary curriculum. According to critics, while a public university may require students to take general education courses (a multidisciplinary approach), such a university fails to practice the synthesis of knowledge, a vital component of an interdisciplinary curriculum. For example, a liberal arts institution prides itself on its interdisciplinary approach to education, meaning an engineering student will take humanities courses while also synthesizing the lessons learned across the curriculum promoting “writing, analysis, and critical thinking” (Godwin & Altbach, 2016).

According to Ferrall (2011), the philosophy of liberal arts can be further simplified into one word, intimacy. With a primary focus on instruction rather than research, liberal arts institutions are intently focused on student learning. Ferrall (2011) describes a liberal arts education as “an act of community, in which students and faculty come together to explore and extend the foundations of knowledge.” This community dedicated to learning captures the essence of Mead’s theory of functionalism in its commitment to exploring and extending one’s knowledge of the world (Troyer, 1946).

While the philosophy of the liberal arts has not changed drastically, the movement’s history has been vast. Rose (2015) provides a detailed history of the liberal approach to education, which first began to develop in the Hellenistic age in the fifth century CE. The founders of this educational philosophy, Isocrates, Cicero, and Quintilian, aimed for an educational system that would prepare students for “a place in public life” (Rose, 2015). As the liberal arts movement grew, Socrates famously added a focus on the search for the truth. His student, Plato, would go on to create a school with the intent of creating moral citizens. This pursuit of truth, or rather understanding, coincides well with Mead’s theory of functionalism and the role of social discourse in reaching a common understanding (Troyer, 1946). It is through the adoption of Socrates’ search for truth and Plato’s devotion to creating moral citizens that social discourse can be used to shape one’s understanding of the world.

As previously mentioned, a primary goal of a liberal arts education is the promotion of good global citizens (Humphreys, 2014). Rose (2015) shares the philosophy of Isocrates, the father of liberal education, who claimed that a liberal education is “a means of self-improvement and preparation for virtuous citizenship.” The liberal arts approach to education grew in popularity with the rise of Christianity. Rose (2015) reports on the philosophy of Lactantius, who

felt a liberal arts approach to education was ideal in winning others to the faith. Later in history, Augustine also engaged with the philosophy of the liberal arts. As he sought to reconcile his liberal education with his faith, Augustine concluded that one's education cannot merely teach one the truth; it must also teach one to love the truth as well. Augustine would go on to argue that a liberal education must distinguish between love and use – “learning the difference between what is lovable in itself and what is lovable only for the sake of another” (as cited in Rose, 2015).

Godwin and Altbach (2016) illustrate the connection between the inception of liberal arts education and contemporary Western education, sharing that most modern initiatives would cite Greek traditions as their inspiration. With the founding of Harvard in 1636, the American higher education system took root. This commitment to a liberal arts education continued as seen in a report from Yale in 1828. In modern times, Ferrall (2011) claims that society's understanding of what it is to be educated implies a liberal arts education. He argues that when society pictures an educated individual, they picture a liberally educated individual, someone who possesses good communication skills alongside the ability to think critically and problem-solve. According to Ferrall (2011), those who have received a vocational education are not the ones that come to mind when society pictures someone with a higher education. Gitter, MacDonald, and Greenleaf (2018) report that at the start of the twentieth-century liberal arts institutions accounted for two-thirds of enrollment in US higher education, which could explain Ferrall's picture of what it is to be educated. While enrollment in liberal arts institutions has continued to decline in recent years, the rich history of liberal arts education is evident in American society.

Expected Outcomes of a Liberal Arts Education

Gitter and colleagues (2018) praise the impact of a liberal arts education for graduates stating, “Although small, private liberal arts colleges enroll a lesser share of US students in higher education, they produce a disproportionately greater share of successful graduates.” What successes are they referencing? Michael Roth, in an interview with Valerie Strauss (2023) for *The Washington Post*, shares that a liberal arts education equips graduates to acquire skills while also understanding how those skills work in a broader context. Roth illustrates this principle with the analogy of a machine, saying that a liberal arts education produces graduates who are not merely trained to be cogs in a machine. Rather, a liberal arts education produces graduates who understand how a machine works and their place in said machine. This idea of understanding how the machine works as a whole is reminiscent of the assertion of Littlejohn and Evans (2006). These authors argue that liberal arts graduates are more successful because of the transferability of their skills, particularly in an economy where the average adult changes careers multiple times in their lifetime. In simple terms, a liberal arts education will produce in graduates an understanding of the world around them and their place in that world, an idea that fits with Mead’s theory of functionalism (Troyer, 1946).

Guth (2020) argues that this global understanding produces better employees, reporting that companies are recruiting well-rounded employees who possess a diverse range of skills and experiences. Andrew Rusnack of the Community College Humanities Association states, “Companies want an imaginative contribution from employees to improve efficiency and make better products. That’s more valuable to them than someone who can just put widgets together” (as cited in Guth, 2020). Employers continue to report that liberal arts graduates perform better in the workforce because they are more adaptable and are capable of creative communication, according to Guth (2020). This creative communication includes the ability to think critically and

to problem-solve. James Hart, the interim dean of liberal arts at County College Morris (CCM), shares the following.

I get a sense of optimism from our students about their job prospects, because the skill areas that liberal arts imparts—such as strong reasoning and verbal communication—are going to be key even as AI develops and more jobs become automated. There will still be jobs that require creativity and a high level of problem solving and ethical reasoning. (as cited in Guth, 2020)

These findings correlate with those of the *Business Mirror* (“Yes, Employers,” 2019) which reports that 80% of employers assert that graduates should have a strong liberal arts foundation. Likewise, Watson and McConnell (2018) assert that a graduate’s skill set rather than their major sets them up for success in the workforce. Skills that employers are looking for include “flexibility, mental agility, ethics, resilience, systems thinking, communication, and critical thinking” (Watson and McConnell, 2018), with 93% of employers stating that critical thinking is of greater importance than a candidate’s major (Hart Research Associates, 2013). Additionally, Watson and McConnell (2018) share that business executives are much more likely to hire candidates with extensive writing experience, such as a senior project or thesis. Such projects are a hallmark of a liberal arts education as they “provide real-world experiences or indeed actually occur within real-world settings” (Watson & McConnell, 2018).

Beyond the implications for the workforce, a liberal arts education equips individuals to be good global citizens, according to Humphreys (2014), who states, “Humanities and social science fields are foundational to our democratic vitality. Studying the humanities and social sciences remains essential to becoming a responsible and informed citizen of a diverse and globally engaged nation.” Humphreys (2014) reports that approximately four million employees

hold undergraduate degrees from liberal arts institutions, with 40% of those holding a graduate or professional degree and 14% of those holding a doctorate degree. Based upon these figures, Humphreys (2014) argues that “the liberal arts are essential for building our nation’s intellectual capital and the global leadership that comes along with it.”

Humphreys’ (2014) research suggests that the outcomes of a liberal arts degree include good critical thinking and communication skills, increased performance in the job market, higher levels of education, and better growth as a global citizen. Humphreys and Kelly (2014) argue that students who pursue a broad liberal education increase their likelihood of achieving professional success.

Perceptions of a Liberal Arts Education

While the history and philosophy of liberal arts education has been well established, one has to wonder about the perception of higher education in students and graduates. Anderson (2023) reports that by 2011 more than 50% of college graduates were unemployed or underemployed. Additionally, Kaplan (2023) reports that from 2017 to 2021, the percentage of jobs that required a college degree dropped from 51% to 44% and that adults ages 18-29 who rank college as very important dropped from 74% to 41%. Anderson (2023) asserts that the Covid-19 pandemic catalyzed the shifting focus of students from pursuing higher education to a career post high school, stating, “We’ve gone from pursuing the American Dream to pursuing more doing.” According to Kaplan (2023) several factors have led to this shift in attitude, including the competitive labor market, rising tuition costs, online alternatives, and changing job roles. Companies such as Apple, Tesla, IBM, Delta Airlines, and Hilton no longer require a college degree for an interview. Likewise, Pennsylvania no longer requires a college degree for most state jobs (Anderson, 2023). One of the reasons for this shift is that in requiring a college

degree, hiring executives limit their talent pool. Kaplan (2023) also shares that college graduates did not earn more money than high school graduates in a Massachusetts study. Not only that, but college graduates then spend approximately twenty years paying for their college degree. The *Harvard Business Review* estimates that 1.4 million jobs will be made available to employees who do not have a college degree in the next five years (Anderson, 2023). Finally, some worry that the expansion of AI technologies and the automation of more jobs will further contribute to the decline of higher education (Guth, 2020). While these observations may be valid, The Common App reports that applications were up by 20% in 2023 (Anderson, 2023). This communicates that the future of higher education is far from over. It is just changing.

As attitudes towards higher education, in general, have shifted, one might wonder how attitudes have specifically changed regarding a liberal arts education. A 1998 study at Grinnell College in Iowa sought to understand whether students understand the liberal arts philosophy (Elmore et al., 2006). Researchers found that students continuously highlighted the humanness of their disciplines, highlighting such factors as “contribution[s] to society, fostering communication skills, helping to understand people, [utilizing] feelings and emotions, and [harnessing] creativity” (Elmore et al., 2006). This focus on humanness mirrors the sentiments of Littlejohn and Evans (2006), who argue that the purpose of a liberal arts education is to “understand oneself and one’s place in the world” (p. 25). These findings also coincide with the theory of functionalism as proposed by Mead in students’ devotion to social discourse and understanding one another (Troyer, 1946). The findings of Grinnell College suggest that a significant number of students do embrace the liberal arts model of education while in school, with some students arguing that the fine arts are necessary because they bring beauty to the world (Elmore et al., 2006).

Rodgers and Jackson (2011) conducted a similar study at a small, private, liberal arts university where they sought to understand whether or not the school's perception of its identity matched that of students' perceptions. The answer to this question was achieved by considering the brand promise of the school. According to Rodgers and Jackson (2011), "Brand promise statements are expressions of what customers, students, and their parents should expect through consistent interaction." The goal of a brand promise is to attract consumers while also effectively capturing the ambitions, mission, and strength of the institution. The liberal arts philosophy of such an institution is critical in their recruitment efforts, so one must wonder if students find this branding messaging consistent and accurate throughout their time at a liberal arts university. Data analysis revealed a consistent understanding of the brand promise in freshmen and seniors, meaning the philosophy of education is consistent across the college experience. Rodgers and Jackson (2011) summarize their findings by stating, "The message perceived is consistent with the image intended." While this study does not reveal students' attitudes to a liberal arts education, it does reveal that students at the time of this study understood the philosophy of a liberal arts education and continued to maintain that understanding throughout their education.

A study by Peck and Jennings (1989), however, provides more insight into student perceptions of the liberal arts in their analysis of nursing students at a New York university. This study sought to understand the perceived importance of the liberal arts for nursing students. It revealed that nursing students strongly felt that their liberal arts courses better prepared them for the workforce by encouraging collaboration and interpersonal relations. Peck and Jennings' (1989) sample included current nursing students as well as working alumni, and the working alumni reported an even higher level of importance for the liberal arts than their peers still in school. This finding led Peck and Jennings (1989) to wonder if entering the workforce led nurses

to more fully grasp the importance of a broad liberal arts education than simply their college courses.

The available data provides a good foundation for this study by illustrating the changing attitudes toward higher education in a general sense. However, the studies that reference the findings of liberal arts students were conducted many years ago, leading one to wonder how perceptions of liberal arts students have changed in recent years since the Covid-19 pandemic and the expansion of AI technologies.

The Evolution of American Higher Education

While the establishment of Harvard University in 1636 saw the introduction of the liberal arts to America, the higher education opportunities of this nation have evolved over the last couple of centuries. Several key researchers have completed extensive research on the history of higher education in the United States, including Thelin (2019) and Geiger (2015), and recent years have seen even greater changes in the world of higher education in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic and the expansion of AI technologies.

To understand the current state of higher education and the current role of the liberal arts, however, one must understand how the world of higher education reached this current point. Both Thelin (2019) and Geiger (2015) refer to the earliest stage in higher education history as the inception of colonial colleges. These colleges were named for their charters, royalty, or the denomination for which they were founded (Thelin, 2019). The College of William and Mary was founded by Anglicans in 1693, and Yale College was founded in 1701 by Puritans. The primary goal of these early institutions was to prepare students for roles in ministry and community affairs. Thelin (2019) acknowledges the close connection between early higher education and religion and credits the success of these early higher education institutions to the

denominations that financially supported them, as other sources of funding were inconsistent and unreliable. Geiger (2015) also reports that these colonial colleges were places of learning for the social elite, while Thelin (2019) refers to these students as gentleman scholars.

The 1700s saw the introduction of colleges to the middle colonies. Geiger (2015) credits this expansion to The Great Awakening as well as the rapid growth and diversification of thought in the colonies, with the Enlightenment serving as a major influence on this period of education. The southern colonies, however, were not exposed to higher education to the same degree. Thelin (2019) explains this lack of presence in the South by highlighting the absence of interest in the more agrarian society.

The Revolutionary War and the immediate years following saw a rapid increase in educational offerings. Geiger (2015) asserts that this growth was to reestablish “the natural aristocracy of learning and talent.” Thirteen colleges were established in this time: four public colleges, eight private colleges with religious affiliations, and one nonsectarian private college. The period of 1800-1820, however, was characterized by very little growth, which Geiger (2015) attributes to the nation’s new egalitarian spirit. He shares that prior to the Revolutionary War, approximately one percent of white males attended college, and yet attendance did not reach that same level until the mid-1820s. While the number of students enrolling in institutions may not have changed greatly with the increase in available institutions, Thelin (2019) does report that this period saw an increase in medical and law schools as well as an increase in courses in the sciences.

The following era of education, however, can be described as a renaissance of education, with the number of colleges growing from 28 to 80 from 1815 to 1840 (Geiger, 2015). Enrollment also increased, with the number of students increasing from 2,566 to 8,324. This

period of education was marked by the creation of West Point and the University of Virginia. Additionally, Geiger (2015) credits the Yale Reports of 1828, which communicated that a college education was foundational in an individual's education for this increase in enrollment. Finally, this period also saw the inception of higher education institutions for women, including Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, Oberlin College, and the Georgia Female College, as a direct result of the Second Great Awakening (Geiger, 2015).

The mid-1800s saw a shift in higher education philosophy as there was a higher premium placed on the student experience with the advent of fraternities and other social organizations (Geiger, 2015). The Civil War, however, brought even more change to the educational landscape with the Morrill Land Grant Act of 1862, which allowed for land grant universities. This period also saw a shift away from the liberal arts as science gained prominence with the establishment of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). Thelin (2019) identifies this as a period of increased interest in a "useful education."

This movement away from the liberal arts and towards the sciences was made even more evident during the period surrounding World War I. While the interest in liberal arts waned, the interest in higher education did not, with college attendance increasing from 5.5% in 1915 to 15.5% in 1940 (Geiger, 2015). Thelin (2019) credits the GI Bill and the growth of the middle class for this surge in college enrollment, but this vocational philosophy of education marked the first clear break from a liberal arts philosophy.

The age of higher education that society recognizes today, however, did not come to fruition until the 1920s thanks to the philanthropic work of Andrew Carnegie and John D. Rockefeller. The giving of the 20s allowed higher education to withstand the Great Depression.

Geiger (2015) reports that the 1940 census revealed that more adults graduated college in the US than in any other nation in the world.

Geiger (2015) closes his analysis of the history of higher education in America by making four observations. First, despite the evolution of American higher education, the liberal arts survived. Second, practical forms of higher education, however, rose to the same prominence as the liberal arts. Third, America's role in the scientific landscape was solidified; fourth, President Truman's Commission on Higher Education for Democracy saw 50% of all students attending a higher education institution by 1960. Thelin (2019) likewise reports that college enrollment increased from 2% in 1880 to 50% in 1960, arguing that "self-made men wanted to send their sons to have a shared campus experience that would position them to associate with young men from established, well-educated families." By the end of World War II, a college education was largely expected for those wishing to be successful in the workforce.

Higher education has seen drastic changes since the work of Geiger (2015) and Thelin (2019). The Covid-19 pandemic required institutions to embrace alternative forms of learning, with many continuing to lean into online platforms since the end of the pandemic. Additionally, the expansion of AI technologies has left many wondering what jobs will still be relevant in the near future (Guth, 2020). Levine and Van Pelt (2021) consider the changing landscape of higher education, arguing that traditional models of higher education have been rendered obsolete. Levine and Van Pelt (2021) highlight those institutions that have abandoned time- and place-based education, have created low-cost degrees, have adopted outcomes-based education, have emphasized digital technologies, and have offered groundbreaking certifications in new and underrepresented subject areas. The authors look back to the evolution of higher education during the Industrial Revolution, when institutions such as Johns Hopkins University, Cornell

University, and MIT were established in response to the changing demands of society. Levine and Van Pelt (2021) argue that the future of higher education resides in micro-credentials and certifications rather than degrees and that higher education institutions will have to adapt to these changing demands.

Decline and Current Status of Liberal Arts Education

As evidenced by previous sections, while the liberal arts have undergone a drastic decline since the inception of America's first colleges and universities, the philosophy underlying this educational approach has remained true. Thompson (2015) defines this philosophy as a quest for knowledge and truth. This quest for knowledge and truth mirrors the sentiments of Mead in his proposed theory of functionalism in its role as a form of social discourse to establish common understanding (Troyer, 1946).

From 2010 to 2012, Gitter et al. (2018) report a decline in enrollment by 10% in private four-year schools. At the beginning of the twentieth century, however, two-thirds of all students enrolled in higher education were attending liberal arts institutions. By 1987, that number had dropped to 4.4%, and today it is estimated that less than 2% of students attend liberal arts universities (Breneman, 1994). Additionally, Nietzel (2020) reports the greater impact the Covid-19 pandemic had on liberal arts colleges and universities, with some schools experiencing a 5% decline in enrollment in just one year. Thompson (2015) argues that the liberal arts have lost favor with the public because of a shift in ideals and values. Kimball (2015), in contrast, argues that it is less the philosophy of liberal arts that has lost favor and more so the core of the liberal arts—the humanities—which have lost favor.

The humanities comprise art, literature, philosophy, history, language, visual arts, theater, dance, and music (Department of Defense). Littlejohn and Evans (2006) summarize the pursuit

of the humanities by asking, “What does it mean to be human?”. Kimball (2015) recognizes that this pursuit of understanding humanity does not easily align with the corporate values of today. This dichotomy between corporate and academic values poses a major obstacle for the liberal arts. Kimball (2015) goes as far as to say the following:

Enrollments in the liberal arts, particularly English, literature, and the other humanities, have declined precipitously in the last four decades, while enrollments in vocational education have increased sharply. Commensurately, contingent faculty are replacing tenure-line faculty, and corporate values are eclipsing academic values. These shifts are undermining the institutional strength of liberal arts colleges, academic tenure, and faculty autonomy and governance. Consequently, academic freedom and the academic profession are deteriorating, and the production of knowledge and the marketplace of ideas, necessary for a democracy to function, are threatened as well.

For proponents such as Kimball (2015), who argue that all students should be liberally educated, the decline of the liberal arts poses a very real threat to the future of society.

Similarly, Hu (2017) recognizes the tension between a holistic education and careerism. This tension has led to the direct closure of 20 liberal arts colleges in the last decade, and larger institutions have acquired another 40 liberal arts colleges. Hu (2017) argues that the shift of focus to vocational education in response to market demands has seen an abandoning of the liberal arts philosophy. By focusing on vocational education, institutions are failing to educate the individual as a whole. This can lead to neglect of citizenship, social responsibility, and community service—in other words, a decline of Mead’s theory of functionalism (Troyer, 1946). Hu (2017) also recognizes that the decline of the liberal arts is also due in part to the cost of a traditional degree, reporting that 54% of liberal arts degree recipients have over \$20,000 in

college debt. In contrast, only 39% of other bachelor's degree recipients have over \$20,000 in college debt. Hu (2017) also recognizes the increasing attraction of an online degree and the freedom that such an educational approach provides.

Chen and Min (2021) consider the changes faced by the liberal arts and urge institutions to adapt to the changing world around them, stating, "Practical liberal education does not mean abandoning all aspects of the traditional model, but better adapting to the diverse needs of American society more comprehensively." Is it possible for the liberal arts and the theory of functionalism to prevail in the changing academic landscape? Researchers such as Chen and Min (2021) do not wish to see liberal arts institutions abandon their values; however, they want to see a liberal arts education become more accessible to the public. While enrollment in liberal arts institutions used to be much greater as reported by Gitter et al. (2018), Chen and Min (2021) highlight that a liberal arts education has traditionally been reserved for the elite or those lucky enough to afford such an education. They argue that a liberal arts education of the twenty-first century must be available to all students as it is essential for global citizenship. This can be achieved through an integrated approach to learning that bridges the gap between workplace preparedness and global citizenry. By embracing Mead's theory of functionalism, proponents of the liberal arts can demonstrate the role that social discourse serves not only in workplace preparedness but also in one's citizenship (Troyer, 1946).

The New York Times published an article titled "The Value of a Liberal Arts Education" in 2023 that highlights the steps liberal arts institutions are taking to be more accessible, sharing the perspective of a STEM major at a liberal arts university. The student shared that their liberal arts coursework was important in their self-discovery, forcing them to think conceptually and critically. The student goes as far as to argue that their liberal arts coursework has proven of

equal importance in preparing them for the workforce stating, “While the most significant argument against liberal arts is their impracticality, these classes have fostered my critical thinking and interpersonal skills, improving my performance in other academic courses and making me a more competitive candidate for jobs” (as cited in “The value”).

Another success story for the liberal arts in this modern era of education can be found at Allegheny College, which has established new majors, including Software Engineering, Data Science, Industrial Design, and Public Humanities (“Allegheny College”). The college recognizes that a liberal arts philosophy of education can be applied to these new areas of study with the added bonus that these inventive areas will attract students who would otherwise have never considered a liberal arts education. The President of the college shared that while many liberal arts institutions are decreasing the number of programs offered in the face of a decline in liberal arts, Allegheny College is committed to continuing to offer new and relevant areas of study meeting the needs of the current marketplace while also promoting the ideals of a liberal arts philosophy.

The Community College Research Center reports continued interest in liberal arts coursework, leading Pippins et al. (2019) to argue that the investment in a liberal arts philosophy remains. Students in a world marked by careerism are still greatly interested in the humanities and understanding what it is to be human. These findings should give hope to proponents of the liberal arts as they illustrate that the interest in the liberal arts remains; however, these liberal arts institutions must find a way to walk that fine line of adapting to the world around them while remaining true to their mission and values. Ferrall (2011) argues that the liberal arts can only be truly saved if its mission and values are retained, and this must be a commitment of all liberal

arts institutions. For as Docking and Curton (2015) argue, if the liberal arts are lost, the nation will lose one of its greatest assets.

Summary

The liberal arts philosophy has withstood the changing landscape of education since its inception by the Greeks. Its commitment to global citizenry and an understanding of what it means to be human sets it apart from a more vocational philosophy of education. While its presence in the world of higher education has waned in recent decades, its influence is still greatly felt in society with a disproportionate share of leaders, including 12 US Presidents and a quarter of recent Nobel Laureates, earning a liberal arts degree (Gitter et al., 2018). Likewise, employers are more interested in skills earned than a degree achieved, as illustrated by the findings of the Hart Research Associates (2013). In training students to engage in social discourse, mastering the skill of not only communicating with one another but also understanding one another, educators can achieve the goals of a liberal arts education while also honoring Mead's theory of functionalism (Troyer, 1946).

Chapter 3

Research Methodology

There is a limited amount of emerging literature regarding graduates' perceptions of their liberal arts education. The currently available literature has considered the changing attitudes of prospective students toward the liberal arts approach to education, resulting in a steady decline in enrollment (Gitter et al., 2018; Kimball, 2015; Thompson, 2015). Overall, the research has highlighted the decline of a liberal arts philosophy in higher education institutions. Some suggest that this decline is due to a change of values as there is a cultural shift to careerism (Hu, 2017). Others suggest that this shift in thinking results from the rising cost of a liberal arts education (Anderson, 2023). This study, however, aimed to understand the perspective of graduates rather than the educational landscape at large. Do students who invested in a liberal arts education feel such an investment was worth it? Has this investment served them in the workforce in ways that another degree could not? This study considered the perceptions of 2010-2013 graduates from a private liberal arts university in Northeast Tennessee.

Research Questions

Does a liberal arts education prepare students to be successful in the workforce?

Do liberal arts graduates gain anything from their educational experience that they would have otherwise missed?

Research Design

For this study, a qualitative research methodology was adopted. Merriam and Tisdell (2017) describe qualitative researchers as being “interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to

their experiences” (p. 6). The primary concern of a qualitative study is “understanding the meaning people have constructed” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2017, p. 15).

Participants in this study provided qualitative data by participating in individual interviews, and Cresswell’s (2013) six-step approach for analyzing interviews was adopted. Cresswell’s (2013) approach includes the following: transcribing the interviews, reviewing the transcribed interviews for general understanding, coding the data, describing themes, identifying the qualitative narrative, and interpreting the findings. This approach was ideal as it provided the best opportunity to understand the perceptions of graduates.

Site Selection

One private liberal arts university was selected for this study. The university is located in Northeast Tennessee and has demonstrated a commitment to a liberal arts approach to education for over 150 years. The university enrolled over 1,200 students in 2023 from 42 states and 38 countries. The university also offers over 100 programs of study.

Participants in the Study

Permission was granted for the study from the university’s Institutional Review Board (IRB; see Appendix A). Graduates spanning from 2010-2013 from the university of study were then contacted via email with the help of the university’s Office of Alumni Relations. This initial email was not sent to transfers. Maximum variation sampling was then applied to respondents. This approach identified “those who represent the widest possible range of the characteristics of interest for the study” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2017, p. 98). This means that participants represented a variety of differences, including gender, graduation year, degree earned, and career choice.

The total number of participants was 11 graduates, consisting of five men and six women. The majors represented amongst these graduates included the following: Accounting, Bible,

business, communications, computer information systems, exercise science, history, humanities, math, nursing, psychology, and sociology. Upon their selection, personal interviews were conducted.

Role of the Researcher

Due to the researcher being employed at the selected university, the researcher was considered a partially active participant in the study because her current role does entail a vested interest in the school's enrollment. Interview questions were crafted to avoid leading participants' responses (see Appendix B). A secondary coder was also utilized to counteract any potential bias of the primary researcher in interpreting the data.

Data Collection Methods and Procedures

The data collection method adopted for this study was qualitative via personal interviews. Validity and reliability were established by means of member checking and the adoption of a secondary coder. The member checking process entailed sharing data results with participants to ensure that their perspectives were represented accurately. Likewise, the process of utilizing a secondary coder invited a fellow researcher to analyze the data, which allowed for the identification of themes to aid in constructing the research narrative.

Selection of Participants

Participants were selected via maximum variation after an initial email was sent out to all traditional graduates from 2010-2013 with the help of the university's Office of Alumni Relations. Once participants were selected, a consent form (see Appendix C) was retrieved, and personal interview times were scheduled. Each interview began with a verbal confirmation of consent and a reminder that participants would be allowed to review their responses before completion of the study.

Implementation of the Study

Respondents to the initial email sent to all graduates from 2010-2013 underwent maximum variation sampling. Once participants were selected, they were notified via email of their selection for the study and were asked to return a signed consent form. This initial communication also allowed participants to schedule their interview. These personal interviews were scheduled over four weeks and were conducted via Zoom. The interviews were recorded and saved to the researcher's password-protected, personal device. Interviews were then transcribed using Otter, an artificial intelligence transcription software. These transcripts were then carefully reviewed by the researcher to ensure that all necessary corrections were made. Upon completing all interviews, the researcher coded the interviews to identify themes. A secondary coder was also utilized to establish the validity and reliability of the emerging themes.

Open-ended and semi-structured interview questions were adopted for this study. This commitment to open-ended and semi-structured questions allowed for the greatest level of understanding to be reached. Once the researcher and secondary coder identified themes, the data was shared with participants to ensure that their perceptions were accurately captured, further establishing the validity and reliability of the study.

Data Management

Zoom interviews served as the sole means of data collection for this study with each interview recorded and saved to the researcher's password-protected device. All data resulting from this study will be locked in a filing cabinet for five years from the date of a successful defense of the research, and all electronic data will remain password protected. At the completion of that five years, all electronic data will be deleted, and all written notes will be shredded.

Data Analysis

Per Merriam and Tisdell (2017), the primary concern of qualitative research is understanding how others view the world and their experiences in the world, saying, “All qualitative research is interested in how meaning is constructed, how people make sense of their lives and their worlds. The primary goal of a basic qualitative study is to uncover and interpret these meanings” (p. 25). The six-step approach for analyzing interviews created by Cresswell (2013) was adopted for this study. It was characterized by transcribing interviews, identifying general ideas, coding the data, describing themes, identifying the qualitative narrative, and interpreting the findings.

After creating an interview transcript, interviews were read, highlighted, annotated, and categorized to identify themes. Additionally, a secondary coder was also adopted to analyze these interviews. Upon identifying themes and categories, participants were invited to participate in member checking to ensure their ideas were represented correctly. The findings of this study are highlighted in detail in Chapter Four.

Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of this study is assured through the adoption of member checking and a secondary coder. With a commitment to understanding graduates’ perceptions, the researcher was able to set aside personal biases to capture the perspectives of participants. By utilizing member checking, the researcher achieved validity and reliability, ensuring that participants were satisfied with how their ideas were presented in the data. Validity and reliability were also maintained through the adoption of a secondary coder. By selecting a coder who was not actively involved at the university, the researcher was able to identify and remove any biased interpretation of the data.

Ethical Considerations

According to Merriam and Tisdell (2017) research must be conducted ethically. Vanclay, Baines, and Taylor (2013) stress that receiving permission and communicating the right to withdraw are hallmarks of ethical research. To ensure that this study was conducted ethically the following ethical considerations were adopted:

1. Each participant was asked to provide a signed consent form before the completion of their personal interview.
2. Participants were asked to participate in member checking to ensure that their words were captured correctly. Participants could also choose to withdraw from the study at any time.
3. Data was either password-protected or kept in a locked filing cabinet.

Chapter 4

Data Analysis and Findings

This qualitative research study aimed to investigate graduates' perceptions of their liberal arts education. The study specifically considered the perceptions of graduates spanning from 2010-2013 from a private liberal arts university in Northeast Tennessee. As outlined in Chapter Three, a qualitative methodology was adopted to gather data from graduates who shared their perceptions of their liberal arts education.

For this study, individual interviews were the sole means of qualitative data collection. In interviewing individual participants, the researcher analyzed individual responses to discover overarching themes, resulting in a narrative for the study. The study's qualitative data was collected from 11 selected participants via maximum variation. The demographics of the selected participants are represented in Table 1.

Table 1

Selected Participant Demographics

Identification	Graduation Year	Major Earned	Current Career
Participant 1	2013	Exercise Science	Teacher
Participant 2	2010	Computer Information Systems	Technical Project Manager
Participant 3	2010	Humanities and Sociology	Professor
Participant 4	2013	Math	Medical Student

Participant 5	2012	Communications and Business	Stay-at-home Parent
Participant 6	2012	Nursing	Nurse
Participant 7	2011	Psychology	Professor
Participant 8	2010	History	Graduate Student
Participant 9	2013	Bible	Tour Guide
Participant 10	2012	Business Administration	Seminary Student
Participant 11	2011	Accounting	Teacher

Each interview varied in length from 20-90 minutes. The data set included five males and six females.

Analysis of Data

Data were analyzed by adopting Creswell's (2013) six-step process for analyzing and interpreting qualitative data, which includes transcribing the interviews, reviewing the transcribed interviews for general understanding, coding the data, describing themes, identifying the qualitative narrative, and interpreting the findings. Additionally, interview transcripts were subjected to member checking to ensure their credibility and reliability. Likewise, coding the data was completed by the primary researcher and a secondary coder to further ensure the credibility and reliability of the study.

Research Questions

Does a liberal arts education prepare students to be successful in the workforce?

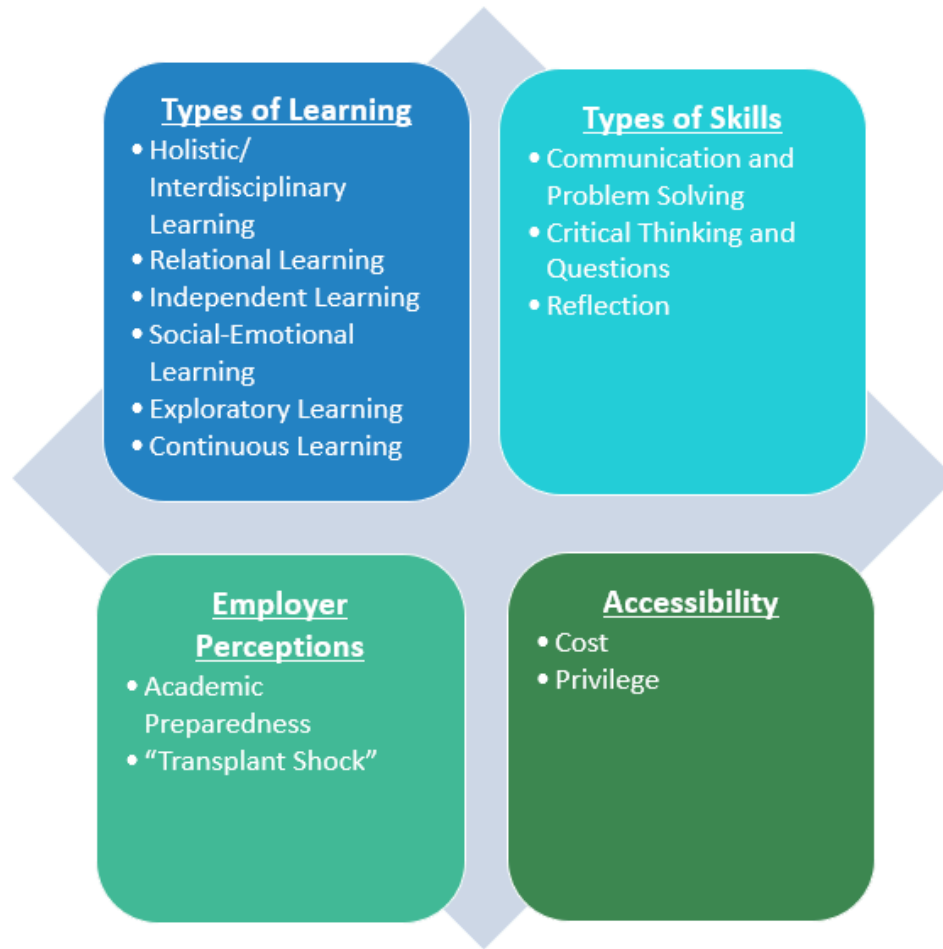
Do liberal arts graduates gain anything from their educational experience they would have otherwise missed?

Interview Questions (Appendix B)

1. What is your current career?
2. A liberal arts education entails the integration of a student's intended area of study with courses on art, communication, composition, history, religion, science, and sociology and to produce global citizens equipped to solve real-world problems. Tell me about your experiences with liberal arts education. Did you enjoy the liberal arts approach to education? Why or why not?
3. Give me an example of a skill that you earned as a result of your liberal arts education. What are the opportunities you have had to use this skill?
4. How would you describe or define the liberal arts education you received?
5. What are your perceptions of the benefits and disadvantages of a liberal arts education?
6. Do you feel like you missed out on any opportunities by attending a liberal arts university?
7. Would you want your children to receive a liberal arts education? Why or why not?
8. Did your liberal arts education impart any skills that an alternative education would have missed?
9. Did your liberal arts education prepare you for life after school? Why or why not?
10. Tell me about the learning activities that you engaged in that were liberal arts-focused. Did those prove helpful to you? Why or why not?

Figure 1

Overview of Global Themes and Sub-Themes



Upon the completion of the interviews, data were identified and categorized. The coding of data was achieved through the identification of overarching themes as well as sub-themes (see Figure 1). As mentioned in Chapter Three, individual interviews were conducted via Zoom, and the transcription app, Otter, was used to transcribe each interview in real-time. Each interview transcript was then carefully reviewed by the primary researcher to correct any mistakes made by the app. Transcripts were then sent to participants for member checking. The coding process, with the help of a secondary coder, revealed the following overarching themes: (1) Types of Learning, (2) Types of Skills, (3) Employer Perceptions, and (4) Accessibility. The study

consisted of 11 participants identified by a pseudonym of “Participant” followed by an assigned number (Participant 1, Participant 2, etc.).

Types of Learning

The most prominent perception theme across all interviews was the global theme of various types of learning embodied within the liberal arts approach to education. The various types of learning highlighted within the interviews included the following: (1) holistic/interdisciplinary learning, (2) relational learning, (3) independent learning, (4) social-emotional learning, (5) exploratory learning, and (6) continuous learning. Table 2 illustrates the frequency of the number of times these types of learning were referenced throughout 11 interviews.

Table 2

Types of Learning as a Global Theme

Holistic/ Interdisciplinary Learning	Relational Learning	Independent Learning	Social- Emotional Learning	Exploratory Learning	Continuous Learning
42	41	21	19	18	12

As noted in Table 2, more participants referenced the holistic and interdisciplinary learning that occurs within the liberal arts approach to education than any other type of learning, with 42 mentions; however, relational learning was a close second, with 41 references to the relational aspect of learning present in a liberal arts institution. 21 references were also made to independent learning throughout the 11 interviews, followed closely by social-emotional learning with 19 references. 18 mentions were made alluding to the exploratory learning that occurs within the liberal arts, and 12 mentions were made alluding to the continuous learning that continues beyond graduation for those who receive a liberal arts education.

Holistic/Interdisciplinary Learning

As noted in Table 2, more references were made to the holistic and interdisciplinary aspects of a liberal arts education than any other type of learning resulting from this philosophical approach to education. Every single participant highlighted the well-rounded nature of a liberal arts education, with Participant 1 defining a liberal arts graduate as “a well-rounded candidate.” Participant 3 emphasized the holistic approach to education within the liberal arts, explaining that they have a more holistic understanding of the world around them as a result of their education, going so far as to argue, “We need the arts and the humanities...this idea of being fully human and approaching things from a fully well-rounded perspective.” Participant 3 explained this well-rounded approach to education as very balanced because it allows one to value different perspectives. Participant 5 selected the term “broad” to describe a liberal arts approach to education, sharing, “The liberal arts in general is just a very broad education; you have opportunities to experience a broad spectrum of different skills and different classes, different subjects.” This participant shared that this broad exposure to subjects instills a love of learning into students as it allows them to be exposed to knowledge they otherwise would not have been exposed to.

Similarly, Participant 4 used the term integration to define the liberal arts approach to education, sharing a love for the curriculum:

I love the curriculum in the sense that, like, and I think honestly, I feel like I’m a decent example of having gotten a lot of, you know, more of like the, you know, liberal arts of sociology and history and the New Testament and Old Testament survey[s] and all the Bible courses and the philosophy courses, and then also the science courses, and I feel

like academically certainly at [a liberal arts institution] that was integrated very well and prepared me very well to be open to doing a lot of various career paths.

This participant went on to support the interdisciplinary approach of the liberal arts, arguing that one's "educational experience should prepare you to be able to engage with a variety of people from a variety of different perspectives."

This idea of interacting with individuals outside of one's study area was prevalent in many interviews, with participants suggesting that an alternative education would have failed to promote learning alongside students outside of their major. Participant 1 highlighted the opportunity to witness "different people talking and communicating and sharing ideas" as a part of their liberal arts education with the added benefit of "hearing different perspectives and getting different viewpoints." Participant 7 adopted the metaphor of a thread weaving this interdisciplinary approach to the curriculum into one cohesive education. By taking classes rooted in an interdisciplinary approach, Participant 7 shared that they can now hold context when talking with others about any issue or topic, sharing that a liberal arts education imbues nimbleness in an individual, allowing them to flex and adjust in situations with others. Participant 9 mirrored this sentiment by sharing that the holistic approach to education "forms a more whole person as a member of society rather than just giving them skills that can be utilized."

Throughout these interviews, it became evident that liberal arts graduates perceived their education to have been holistic and interdisciplinary, producing well-rounded global citizens. Participant 9 described the outcome of well-rounded global citizens, saying it captures the interconnectedness of humanity. Others, such as Participant 10, emphasized the openness of a liberal arts education as it expands one's frame of reference and allows one to see beyond

oneself. Several participants asked, “What does it mean to be human?” as the all-encompassing mission of the liberal arts approach to education. In contrast, an alternative approach to education, according to participants, is more utilitarian and skills-based.

The benefits of a well-rounded, holistic, interdisciplinary education were emphasized in the 11 interviews. While participants communicated that a liberal arts approach to education encompasses a variety of types of learning, the holistic and interdisciplinary nature of education was the most frequently mentioned. These qualities of the liberal arts were defined in contrast to other philosophical approaches to education, with participants suggesting that they are more well-rounded global citizens than peers who did not receive a liberal arts education. Participants also considered the ability to converse and relate with various individuals and perspectives as a consequence of being a well-rounded global citizen. In summary, participants perceive their liberal arts education to have been holistic and interdisciplinary, with participants highlighting this quality of the liberal arts more than any other.

Relational Learning

Relational learning was the second most frequently highlighted type of learning, as evidenced by Table 2. All of the participants emphasized the relational nature of the liberal arts approach to education, highlighting that learning at a liberal arts institution occurs alongside other students as well as professors. Participant 9 shared, “You don’t get that outside of a liberal arts education usually where you get to have undergraduate influence, where you’re getting to learn as they learn and having that active teacher as learner.” Participant 7 mirrored this sentiment by sharing that the liberal arts approach to education allows students to co-create alongside their professors. The participant shared that while the professor is the expert in the

room, the students also have valuable knowledge and insights to share, saying, “There’s a recognition that we all bring some level of insight into [the classroom].”

Participant 5 directly referenced the relational aspect of learning at a liberal arts institution, emphasizing the small-group learning that can take place at a smaller liberal arts university. This smallness allows one to get to know professors better and embrace their potential as a resource for students. Participant 5 concluded their interview by celebrating the relational experience of the liberal arts by sharing, “It’s not something that can be taught in school, but you learn how to do it as a person because it is developed in you. You know what I mean? You can’t get it out of a textbook. You have to have that relational experience. Someone has to develop you so that you can develop other people.” They argued that one cannot be successful in one’s career without that relational aspect, stating, “You’re not going to thrive at all if you don’t know how to work with other people.”

Other participants identified the relational aspect of learning through dialogue in the classroom. As previously mentioned in the first sub-theme of this study, the relational aspect also promotes dialogue between students of various areas of study. Participant 10 described it as the “cross-pollination” of ideas, and Participant 7 described it as a “representative microcosm of the broader world and the folks you’ll interact with.” Participant 1 also emphasized the role of dialogue in the liberal arts classroom, stating, “We talked in class...you get in groups, and you hear other people’s perspectives, and you learn to listen and learn to share, and you learn to be in an open environment where you can express ideas.” Similarly, Participant 2 shared, “The benefit of [the liberal arts] was just the closeness and the community and kind of knowing that I could get a professor and say, you know, I’m thinking about this, what do you think, and there’s a lot of opportunity to figure that out.”

Several participants also highlighted that this dialogue continued beyond the classroom, with their liberal arts professors engaging them in activities outside the classroom. Participant 2 described the professors by saying, “It was like they were more than just professors on some level. They were also modeling behavior at the school, like in leadership roles.” Participant 2 shared how some professors would invite students into their homes, saying, “And I know we still talked about, you know, academic material. That never really stopped; it was all just kind of woven in.” This relational learning was so pervasive, according to Participant 2 that learning was often happening without the students even realizing, stating, “[The professors] were passionate about [learning], and they made it seem real. They made it seem like it was workable to be doing what they were doing, and they kind of led you along in how they thought about things...you were learning a lot more than you realized.” Participant 9 voiced that this relational aspect of learning has extended beyond graduation in the way that they now relate and communicate with others, sharing:

You can talk with almost anyone. Not everyone knows everything, but when you can have a cursory knowledge of a lot of human history and experiences, when someone references some part of literature or history, you can at least open the conversation beyond small talk, or you can start to have a deeper level of conversation, and humans genuinely appreciate that.

Participant 3 shared how the mentorship from professors has continued since graduation and argued that that level of mentorship does not exist outside of a liberal arts institution. Participant 3 described this level of mentorship as a resource for liberal arts students sharing, “We all lived on campus, and I intimately knew faculty and administrators and employees...Students really can maximize the resources that are there.” This participant shared

that when writing a Ph.D. dissertation, their liberal arts faculty were available to them years after graduation to offer support and encouragement.

In short, the relational aspect of the liberal arts approach to higher education is vital, according to participants. This relational aspect presents itself through dialogue in the classroom, exposure to a broad range of students and, therefore, ideas and perspectives, mentorship from professors that extends beyond the school, and the ability to continue to engage in meaningful dialogue with those they come into contact with post-graduation. Learning does not happen in an isolated way, rather learning occurs alongside one's peers and professors as all work together to reach a higher level of understanding of the world around them.

Independent Learning

While the sub-theme of independent learning may appear to be in direct conflict with the sub-theme of relational learning, these interviews would suggest that these two types of learning work in tandem at a liberal arts institution, with 21 references to independent learning being made throughout these interviews. Participant 1 described independent learning as a means of getting to know oneself better. Likewise, Participant 2 argued that the purpose of a liberal arts education is “personal development,” sharing that a liberal arts institution will challenge and develop students beyond the classroom. While much of liberal arts learning is relational, Participant 2 suggested that a liberal arts education enables one to work on one's own. Participant 3 described their education at a liberal arts institution as “a willingness to let myself evolve.” This learning evolution was achieved through asking personal questions as they navigated their education. This aspect of education is set apart from the relational aspect already discussed as it requires one to analyze one's understanding of the world personally.

Participant 5 went so far as to say that their liberal arts education developed them to the point that they could go in and succeed in their role at their job, sharing that even though a particular skill may not have been learned in the liberal arts classroom that the foundation of learning had been established so thoroughly that they now have the tools to learn new things and to continue on a path of self-improvement. Participant 5 summarized their liberal arts education by stating, “I was able to understand why I thought the way I thought and why I do things that I do and then learn about all of these other people’s personalities. It all goes back to if you know yourself, you can understand and take the time to understand someone else.”

Participant 6 also highlighted the role that their liberal arts education has played in advancing their self-improvement and self-awareness. The participant shared that each individual will face challenges in life, and a liberal arts education supplies the foundation to navigate those challenges on a personal level, saying, “It’s just going to help you in life. It’s really, it’s gonna ground you and it’s just going to help you make better decisions and think through problems.” Participant 9 also celebrated the independent aspects of a liberal arts education, arguing that this type of education “forms you as a person.” Participant 9 described one's education as a study in “self-analyzing and self-actualization.”

This data highlights the paradoxical relationship between relational learning and independent learning that work in tandem at a liberal arts institution. According to participants, independent learning is a direct result of this liberal arts philosophical approach as it encourages students to be intrinsically motivated and ask themselves questions. By promoting self-improvement and self-awareness, the liberal arts emphasize the importance of independent learning.

Social-Emotional Learning

The characteristics of social-emotional learning were mentioned almost as often as independent learning, with 19 references from participants. Two terms that frequently appeared across the interviews were empathy and compassion. Participant 1 argued that the liberal arts approach to education produces more empathetic and compassionate graduates. Participant 4 identified the social-emotional components of their learning as “one of the most formative elements” of their education. As a medical student, Participant 4 argued for the importance of social and emotional learning, saying that that type of education lays a solid foundation for any individual. Participant 3 described their liberal arts education through resilience, stating, “What I gained with a liberal arts education was just resilience...resilience against fear.”

Participant 5 suggested that the incorporation of social-emotional learning produces servant leaders. The participant even shared that this servant-oriented approach to education is why they have been successful in their career. Participant 7 also praised the social-emotional learning that occurs at a liberal arts institution, sharing, “I think a liberal arts education helps you to be a little bit more of that global citizen in a sense and to translate or interact across relationships, across social structures, across degree fields...it allows me to be, I think, a little bit more nimble in navigating social situations.” Participant 9 also alluded to this idea of global citizenry by arguing that liberal arts education “forms a more whole person as a member of society.” The participants stipulated that their education equipped them to be successful in their social interactions beyond their career. Similarly, Participant 8 described their liberal arts education from a place of curiosity and openness, sharing, “I think that I learned how to read, research, and write from a place of curiosity and openness, instead of preconceived, you know, confirmation bias.”

As evidenced by the data from these interviews, social-emotional learning is another type

of learning embraced in the liberal arts approach to education. For these participants, the social-emotional learning aspect of their education has equipped them to be good global citizens and members of society. Part of being a good global citizen is an openness to other ideas and an appreciation for the variety of perspectives and viewpoints that the world embodies. This appreciation allows one to better communicate with others from a place of empathy and compassion.

Exploratory Learning

With nearly as many mentions as social-emotional learning, the exploratory nature of learning evident within liberal arts education was frequently referenced in interviews, with 18 references made. Almost all of the participants voiced either that they entered college with no clear plans of study or that they have experienced multiple career changes since graduating college. Participants highlighted the exploratory learning that is prevalent in the liberal arts as a tool that helped them to navigate the unknowns of their educations and now their careers.

For example, Participant 2 entered college with no clear plans of study. The participant shared that the exposure to a variety of subjects that a liberal arts education entails led to the participant's addition of a psychology minor in their time at school. Participant 2 even suggested that if high school students are unsure of what they want to study a liberal arts institution would be a better fit for them as it will afford them the opportunity to "dive in and see" what interests them. Participant 10 agreed with this conclusion by suggesting that the liberal arts are an ideal education approach for those unsure of what they want to do. The participant described this type of education by adopting one term: resourcefulness. Likewise, Participant 11 argued that a liberal arts institution supplies a good transition from high school as it allows students to explore and

familiarize themselves with a broad range of subjects that they potentially would not have been exposed to at a different institution.

Participant 3 and their educational journey are examples of the exploratory nature of the liberal arts. While the participant began by pursuing an education degree, the participant shifted to a double major in Bible and sociology, only to shift again to a double major in sociology and humanities by graduation. Likewise, Participant 4, who worked a variety of careers before enrolling in medical school, recognized the exploratory aspect of their education and how it provided them with the opportunity to pursue a variety of career paths. Participant 5 shared a similar journey where they worked several different jobs ranging in scope over a 10-year period. Participant 5 also did not know what they wanted to study at the start of their education, sharing:

I didn't know what I wanted to do when I went into school. So going in I was able to take a lot of different classes and meet a lot of different people, have different opportunities, so that I figured out what I wanted to do. That really shaped me and made me available for different opportunities.

This participant ultimately received degrees in communications and business, sharing that a liberal arts education allows one to discover new things to love and be passionate about that they otherwise would have never discovered.

Participant 8 suggested that a liberal arts education allows one to navigate life without fear. By being exposed to various perspectives and viewpoints, one is better equipped to respond to the situations one will encounter post-graduation. From a different perspective, Participant 9 celebrated the beauty of the liberal arts approach by saying, "We in the liberal arts can get an idealized view of what we're doing; we find the beauty in what we are studying." Participant 9

highlighted the exposure that the liberal arts provide by allowing one to “explore other parts of the world and existence and humanity.”

In summary, the exploratory learning that is integral to a liberal arts education provides graduates with exposure to a variety of subjects. This exposure allows students to discover new areas of study that they can be passionate about. Likewise, it allows them to pursue various careers upon graduation as their exposure to various subjects provides them with a broad foundation to build their career off of.

Continuous Learning

While only 12 references to continuous learning were made across interviews, this sub-theme was still pervasive enough to merit mention. As previously mentioned, Participant 2 highlighted the constant nature of their education, sharing that learning was happening continuously even outside of the classroom. Beyond that, Participant 2 argued that graduates of liberal arts institutions will continue to appreciate and will increasingly appreciate the education that they received. Participant 3 also referenced the continuous aspect of their learning even into their career, and Participant 4 argued that continued education is vitally important, stating, “Having to do something that isn’t necessarily the thing that you’re interested in is so valuable...you need to continue to grow.”

While Participant 6 did not grasp the importance of their liberal arts education while they were in school, they shared that since graduation they have gone back and reread everything they were exposed to in undergrad. They suggested that their liberal arts education laid the seeds so they could go back and continue their education into adulthood, sharing, “I think that I developed just a love for reading and a love for studying like art and a love for history.” Similarly, Participant 7 asked, “How is it relevant to me now?” as they reflected on their continued

education. Participant 9 also recognized that their liberal arts education continues to shape their learning, stating that they use it daily and that they are a perpetual student. They shared, “I feel like I’m using how I was formed in that process.”

In summary, the continuous learning promoted by the liberal arts extends far beyond graduation with participants suggesting that they use the skills they have learned daily. Even if they failed to appreciate the value of their liberal arts education at the time, they can now look back on their education with an appreciation for all it gave them.

Types of Skills

The second most prominent perception theme across the interviews was the types of skills that a liberal arts education instills in its graduates. The types of skills highlighted within the interviews included (1) communication and problem-solving, (2) critical thinking and questions, and (3) reflection. Communication and problem-solving skills have been treated as one skill because of how they were addressed in the interviews. Likewise, critical thinking and questions have been identified as one skill. Table 3 illustrates the frequency at which these skills were referenced across all 11 interviews.

Table 3

Types of Skills as a Global Theme

Communication and Problem Solving	Critical Thinking/ Questions	Reflection
23	21	7

As noted in Table 3, the most readily identified skill among graduates was communication and problem-solving, with 23 mentions. Critical thinking and questions came in

a close second with 21 total mentions, and reflection was the final skill highlighted with 7 mentions. These skills were all identified as results of a liberal arts education among graduates.

Communication and Problem-Solving

Throughout these interviews, it became evident that communication and problem-solving often work hand in hand. Participant 2 identified communication and problem-solving as two skills earned due to their education. While a speech class helped the participant hone their communication skills, they recognized that the dialogue across the liberal arts curriculum developed their communication skills. Even as a computer science major, the participant reflected on classes that were spent in a circle discussing the act of programming beyond merely just performing programming. Similarly, Participant 6 recognized how their liberal arts education improved their communication skills through their writing. Participant 8, a current graduate student, also recognized the communication and problem-solving skills they could foster thanks to the university's writing expectations, which helped them learn not only how to write well but also how to research well.

Participant 3 believed that the communication foundation they received from their liberal arts education enabled them to enter a Ph.D. program directly out of undergrad. While the participant may have had different opportunities to conduct undergraduate research than they would have had at a larger institution, they shared that as a freshman, they were expected to write a 10-page ethnography. Now as a college professor at a large state university, the participant recognized that they would never be allowed to set similar expectations for their students.

Participant 4 also recognized the value of the skills learned during their time as an undergraduate by emphasizing the books they were exposed to and the discussions that followed, as well as the papers they were expected to write. While a math major, they were still expected to

communicate well. The participant shared that math exams often took the form of written paper exams. Now, as a medical student, the participant identified those communication and problem-solving skills as instrumental in their success in the medical field.

Participant 5 celebrated the communication and problem-solving skills that they were able to develop as a result of the leadership opportunities that they enjoyed at a small liberal arts university. The participant was able to serve as the Student Government Association (SGA) president for two years and was even involved in the presidential search campaign for the university. The participant said, “I don’t think I would have had that opportunity” if they had attended a larger institution. Participant 5 also made a point of recognizing the problem-solving skills that they have as a result of their education, noting that in their career, they witnessed very few people who knew how to problem-solve. These were the individuals that, according to the participant, were more dependent on the leader in any given situation and could not work independently. Likewise, Participant 9 identified problem-solving skills and how they marry with communication skills by saying, “I think that skill set of seeing the interconnectedness of everything, which is also very overwhelming but is a very helpful skill set, especially for offering perspective when people are in a problem-solving situation or in a meeting where we’re trying to develop a product or develop a system within a workplace.”

As evidenced by this data, liberal arts graduates perceive a major benefit of their education to be the development of their communication and problem-solving skills. For some participants, they recognized the development of these skills through the act of research, reading challenging materials, and writing complex papers. For other participants, they recognized the development of these skills through active dialogue in the classroom.

Critical Thinking and Questions

The sub-theme of critical thinking and questions was referenced nearly as many times as communication and problem-solving, with a total of 21 mentions. Like with communication and problem-solving, critical thinking and questions have been categorized as a single sub-theme for this study as they often work in conjunction. Participants who identified the skill of critical thinking often identified the act of questioning as how the skill of critical thinking manifests itself in their lives today.

Participant 10 identified critical thinking as a key aim of a liberal arts education, arguing that it is “education for its own sake.” The participant went on to say the following, “Seeking truth is, you know, the highest natural endeavor of man. Truth is something that we should seek to possess or be possessed by really, and we do that within the community. We do that with others and their experiences.” This idea that humanity engages in critical thinking and questioning was pervasive in these 11 interviews. Participant 9 presented a case for critical thinking, saying, “[Education] should help [students] understand the thought process behind [the learning] and help them understand why.” Participant 7 captured a similar idea by saying that a liberal arts education answers the how and the why, sharing that the liberal arts gave them:

The ability or the significance of being able to develop my own opinions and thoughts and ideas and understanding of things. I think that’s part of what a liberal arts education does is it supports you in being an independent thinker and challenges you not just to intake and digest information, but to think about it critically, including a broader understanding of what it means to be human.

Participant 7 explained this skill as the synthesis of ideas, meaning a liberal arts education has given them the ability to “think independently and freely make conclusions about information.” When making a case for liberal arts education, Participant 4 shared, “I don’t know what more

you could hope for your children...to be able to think critically about the world, and how do you think critically about the world if you're not exposed to a place where you have to think critically and have a perspective in light of other people?"

Participant 8 recognized critical thinking in their education as they were expected to interpret knowledge not just merely repeat knowledge. This critical thinking has continued into their social interactions beyond undergrad, with Participant 8 sharing that friends will now come to them asking questions about credible news sources. As mentioned previously, Participant 8 shared that because of their critical thinking and questioning skills, they can navigate life without fear of being manipulated by propaganda. As a sociology professor, Participant 3 shared that critical thinking and questioning are a part of their very existence. Beyond that, Participant 3 shared that they received resilience from their liberal arts education, meaning they feel free to ask questions and view the world from a place of critical thinking.

Participant 9 identified a skill that should accompany critical thinking and questioning: the "importance of silence." The participant shared that one professor taught this lesson by waiting however long it took to get an answer to a question he posed in class, saying, "He would never be the person to break the silence, and that taught us the importance of silence because frequently the fastest answer or the most confident one isn't the best...and sometimes you need to take time to process...it's more important to ask better questions."

In summary, critical thinking and questioning are a prized result of a liberal arts education. According to participants, these skills have shaped their lives post-graduation in the way that they process information in the world today, as well as in how they interact with others. Being critical thinkers has enabled these graduates to be independent thinkers who are not afraid to ask questions about the world around them.

Reflection

The final skill highlighted by participants was reflection, with 7 total mentions. Five of the 11 participants emphasized the importance of reflective practices. The majority of those participants identified the capstone course that they were required to take as a part of their liberal arts education as the key moment of reflection that they engaged in. Participant 2 shared, “I think it was really instilled upon us to just be very reflective people no matter what we were doing...and then senior year we did [a capstone course] that brought it all together.” Participant 4 also highlighted this capstone course, sharing that it brought all of the knowledge they had been learning together for one final moment of reflection. Participant 10 identified the capstone course as “a very pivotal course,” sharing that it shaped them in many ways. They called the capstone course “the peak and the summit” of the liberal arts education they received.

Participants 1, 2, and 9 celebrated the reflection that occurred outside of the capstone course, with Participant 9 sharing that students were encouraged to ponder and reflect before answering a question immediately. Similarly, Participant 2, as previously mentioned, remembered participating in round table discussions as a computer science major. Even in a STEM field, Participant 2 felt that reflective practices were critical to their liberal arts education. Participant 1 also remembered keeping a reflective journal in one of their classes.

While the skill of reflection was not mentioned nearly as many times as communication and problem-solving and critical thinking and questioning, the data demonstrate that it does deserve to be mentioned. A key structural component of a liberal arts education is a capstone course, and such a course encourages reflection to a great degree. As evidenced by the data, reflection was not limited to that capstone course. Rather, reflection was prevalent across courses and degrees of study.

Employer Perceptions

The third most prominent perception theme across the interviews was the perceptions of the liberal arts from the perspective of employers and graduate programs. This global theme has been broken down into two separate sub-themes: (1) academic preparedness and (2) “transplant shock”. Table 4 illustrates the breakdown of mentions across all 11 interviews.

Table 4

Employer Perceptions as a Global Theme

Academic Preparedness	“Transplant Shock”
12	15

As noted in Table 4, while there were 12 positive mentions of academic preparedness from employers and graduate schools, there were a greater number of negative perceptions with 15 total mentions. These negative perceptions have been identified as the overall sub-theme of “transplant shock”, a term coined by Participant 2. This is one global theme where participants seemed to be split in their thinking. Some participants even voiced seemingly positive and negative perceptions within a single interview; however, all 11 participants emphasized the perception of employers and/or graduate programs as it relates to the liberal arts education that they received in undergrad.

Academic Preparedness

While some participants could recognize the positive and negative perceptions of their employers, interestingly, most participants who pursued higher education reported more positive perceptions, primarily in terms of academic preparedness. Participant 3 was the first participant to speak about the edge that their liberal arts education gave them when they were pursuing a

Ph.D. in sociology, saying that the program in question was looking for diverse people, so a liberal arts education was the perfect fit for the program as the participant took a broad range of classes, had studied abroad, had engaged in a variety of extracurriculars, and had worked on campus.

Participant 3 described their Ph.D. program as follows, “They’re intentionally trying to pull from a diverse group of students because it actually makes the program stronger because you learn from each other...they don’t want everybody from similar backgrounds.” The participant shared, “I was a great student, and I love school. But that liberal arts background is what enabled me to go all over the place so well.” Participant 3 also argued that a liberal arts background makes for better employees. While the participant admitted that they were not granted the undergraduate research opportunities they would have encountered at a larger university, they posited that a liberal arts education produces the top students in terms of academic foundation. While the participant may have felt behind in some areas post-graduation, the participant also said, “I closed the gap pretty quickly. Like, in that first year, I struggled a little bit, and then I was able to pretty quickly close the gap because of the liberal arts and the academic foundation.”

A current medical student, Participant 4, also spoke to the value of a liberal arts degree from the perspective of the medical field. The participant noted, “As medicine has now shifted more to understanding the social and emotional elements of how we treat patients, having that integration of the science curriculum and, you know, psychology and, you know, understanding people’s reasons and behavior, constructs for why they choose to either take care of [their health] or not take care of their health, it’s really great.” Participant 4 also noted that they can very easily

identify the lack of a liberal arts education in their peers as they struggle to engage with people and to communicate well.

Participant 5 recognized that their liberal arts education is a gift that keeps giving, saying, “I think the ongoing relationships that I have had with [the university] will probably even offer future opportunities for me.” They recognized that not only has their education opened doors for them in their career, but that it will also continue to do so. The participant was so enamored with their liberal arts education that they shared that they hope to even return to the selected university of this study for employment someday.

Participant 7, who currently serves as a graduate professor at a non-liberal arts institution, shared that they can see “a quantitative and qualitative difference in the students that I work with in public versus private and liberal arts versus not. In non-liberal arts, large public universities, most of the teaching is done by GAs and TAs and not by faculty.” From a different perspective, Participant 8, who is currently in graduate school, mirrored Participant 7’s sentiments by sharing that their education “definitely helped prepare me for grad school when it comes to liberal arts.” Participant 10 also shared that their liberal arts education set them up for success in graduate school and beyond.

Participant 9 shared an interesting perspective as they identified the positive and negative perceptions of those they have come into contact with since graduating. Regarding the general positive perceptions they have encountered, Participant 9 suggested that they got their current job because of the unique resume that their liberal arts education afforded them. The participant shared that their “resume looked the most interesting” and “that got me into the door.”

In summary, the perception of academic preparedness held by employers and graduate schools was evident across several interviews, particularly with those participants who went on

to pursue higher education. While many of the participants were able to identify the positive perceptions of those who have hired them or who have admitted them into graduate programs, all but three were also able to identify negative perceptions they have encountered.

“Transplant Shock”

The negative perceptions of participants totaled 15 mentions across interviews, with many of these participants also drawing attention to conflicting positive perceptions. The negative perceptions identified by participants seem to stem from a lack of understanding of what the liberal arts are and what the liberal arts have to offer society. These negative perceptions held by employers seem to come from a place of ignorance rather than distaste for the liberal arts philosophical approach to education. For the purposes of this study, the negative perceptions held by employers have been coded as the all-encompassing sub-theme of “transplant shock.”

Participant 2 coined the term “transplant shock” in their interview, sharing that a liberal arts graduate will inevitably experience this shock when they leave their liberal arts “bubble.” The participant argued that a liberal arts education does not represent a “real world experience.” They shared that this was not necessarily bad, but it was a shock when they transitioned to a large state school for graduate school and realized what their career would look like in reality.

For some participants this “transplant shock” resulted from a lack of exposure. For example, Participant 11 shared that their spouse, who also graduated from the liberal arts school in question, had to take a few prerequisites at another university before starting their master’s program. Participant 3 and Participant 4 also referenced this lack of exposure as it relates to research in STEM fields. As a math major, Participant 4 shared that the math program only had one full-time math professor. Participant 3 shared that they did not have opportunities to conduct undergraduate research as a part of their education.

The four other participants focused on the employability of someone with a liberal arts degree as it relates to “transplant shock”. Participant 1, a teacher, argued that their principal does not care about their liberal arts education, saying, “You get caught up in all that liberal arts and all those classes and all that stuff, and it may put a little bit more space between your ears, but it’s not going to help you in your job.” While Participant 10 did not take as cynical a view of their education as Participant 1, they did say that a disadvantage of a liberal arts degree could be employment opportunities, saying, “People maybe today think [a liberal arts education] is kind of old fashioned or silly or [graduates] don’t really have the expertise or skills necessary to do this job.” Participant 2 wondered if employers would even be able to recognize the value of a liberal arts degree. Participant 6 also posed a similar question, doubting if employers could identify the benefits of hiring someone with a liberal arts background.

Similarly, Participant 9 recognized that “there’s almost no appreciation for [the liberal arts] in the world.” While Participant 9 earned their current job because of their liberal arts background, they also argued that the world does not appreciate the liberal arts approach to education, saying, “We’ve created a society that wants utility over everything. There is very little value for something in and of itself.”

In summary, even if participants enjoyed their liberal arts education and could personally see the benefits of such an education, they could also recognize the conflicting perceptions held by those outside of the liberal arts. As the liberal arts decline, fewer people outside of the liberal arts truly understand the benefits of such a degree. These conflicting perceptions of the liberal arts do pose challenges for graduates.

Accessibility

The final perception theme identified across the interviews was the perception of accessibility. This theme was divided into two aspects of accessibility, namely (1) cost and (2) privilege. Table 5 illustrates the frequency of these two sub-themes.

Table 5

Accessibility as a Global Theme

Cost	Privilege
10	5

As evidenced by Table 5, there were ten total mentions of the cost of a liberal arts degree. There were also five total mentions of the privilege associated with a liberal arts degree. Only four participants hit on this global theme of accessibility; however, since it appeared across a decent portion of the interviews, it merited a mention.

Cost

The sub-theme of cost was referenced 10 times across four interviews with participants recognizing that cost is one of the biggest obstacles that the liberal arts approach to education faces today. Participant 7 even went so far as to refer to a liberal arts degree as a “luxury.” While they recognized the benefits of a liberal arts degree, they felt that the cost was a strong barrier to accessing this type of education. Participant 11 also commented on the cost of their liberal arts degree, particularly when asked if they would encourage their children to attend a liberal arts institution. While the participant shared that their liberal arts education opened many doors for them, they also shared that a liberal arts degree is “a lot more money...so I’m not necessarily going to push [my children] towards that.”

Participant 3 went so far as to say that they have “some pretty severe regrets” about their liberal arts education regarding the level of debt that they accrued to receive their education. Participant 9 shared a similar sentiment when asked if they would encourage others to receive a liberal arts education, saying, “I think if you have the means to do it without going into immense debt, absolutely... If it’s going to put you in average or more debt, absolutely not.” Participant 9 went on to share, “If you’re going to go into debt significantly, I can’t in good conscience advise someone to do it.”

This sub-theme captures the tension currently at play in the liberal arts. While the participants who referenced cost were generally positive about their liberal arts education, they could not confidently say that it was worth it if it would cause an individual to go into debt. This perception of the liberal arts poses a large threat to the future of this philosophical approach to education.

Privilege

The sub-theme of privilege was the least prevalent sub-theme across all 11 interviews, with only 2 participants hitting on this sub-theme; however, the 2 participants hit on this sub-theme a total of five times, so it is worthy of mention. Participants 3 and 9, who also gave heavy attention to the cost of a liberal arts degree, emphasized the privilege of a liberal arts degree. Participant 9 described a liberal arts degree as “a point of privilege.” The participant said, “You’re essentially putting yourself in a different echelon of humanity because not many people can afford to have that type of experience.” Likewise, Participant 3 shared,

Much of the liberal arts is in a place of privilege...but the people that have the best access to those are the legacies. They have the privileged position in society to have a perfect

pathway to get that really cool liberal arts [degree], and other people, you know, have to work really hard to get into those spaces.

While Participant 7 did not directly capture this idea of privilege in their interview, they did touch on the idea of a “us versus them” mentality that tends to be present in educated circles.

The participant shared,

I think that’s one of the unhealthy misnomers that sometimes comes with a liberal arts education is that there’s this us versus them sort of a thing between college educated and not. I don’t think you have to be college educated to be attuned to the liberal arts.

While the sub-theme of privilege was not pervasive across all 11 interviews, it was a strong theme across the two interviews that referenced privilege. This sub-theme once again captures the tension surrounding the accessibility of the liberal arts. While the majority of participants praise the liberal arts as a worthy approach to education that students should pursue, participants also recognize that liberal arts is not accessible to the average student.

Summary of Findings

Chapter Four summarized the findings produced by this study. The global themes presented in the data are (1) Types of Learning, (2) Types of Skills, (3) Employer Perceptions, and (4) Accessibility. Types of Learning and the accompanying sub-themes were coded 153 times; Types of Skills and the accompanying sub-themes were coded 51 times; Employer Perceptions and the accompanying sub-themes were coded 27 times; Accessibility and the accompanying sub-themes were coded 15 times. The tables, narrative, and excerpts thoroughly describe the qualitative data.

Chapter Five will provide a discussion of the implications and limitations of this study. In addition, opportunities for future research will be presented.

Chapter 5

Summary of Findings, Discussions, Recommendations, and Conclusions

The liberal arts approach to education has a rich history in this nation (Rose, 2015; Thelin, 2019; Geiger, 2015). According to Gitter et al. (2018), at the start of the twentieth century, over two-thirds of students were enrolled in liberal arts institutions, and yet today it is estimated that less than 2% of students receive a liberal arts education. According to some scholars, this means that the vast majority of students are missing out on a more holistic approach to education (Hu, 2017). Pippins, Belfield, and Bailey (2019) refer to the liberal arts as “the study and interpretation of languages, literature, and modes of inquiry.” Additionally, Roth, as quoted by Strauss (2023) in *The Washington Post*, shares that a liberal arts education combines acquisition of knowledge with understanding. Ultimately, a liberal arts education entails integration of a student’s intended area of study with courses on art, communication, composition, history, religion, science, and sociology with the objective of producing global citizens equipped to solve real-world problems. Because of this approach to education, employers continue to report that liberal arts graduates perform better in the workforce because they are more adaptable and are capable of creative communication (Guth, 2020).

The success of liberal arts graduates is well-documented (Humphreys & Kelly, 2014; Gitter et al., 2018). Gitter, MacDonald, and Greenleaf (2018) report that liberal arts graduates are twice as likely to attain a Ph.D. Additionally, liberal arts institutions “produce a disproportionate share of leaders” (Gitter et al., 2018). A quarter of Nobel Laureates have received their undergraduate degrees from liberal arts schools, and 12 US presidents have graduated from such institutions. Some of the hallmarks of a liberal arts graduate include transferability of skills (Littlejohn & Evans, 2006), a commitment to global citizenry (Humphreys, 2014), the ability to

think critically and problem-solve (Strauss, 2023), and a commitment to quality communication skills (Watson & McConnell, 2018). These skills pair nicely with the theoretical framework of functionalism which will undergird the entirety of this chapter (Troyer, 1946). According to this theory, intelligent human behavior is inherently social. As such, a liberal arts philosophy of education relies heavily on the implementation of social discourse to reach common understanding (Guth, 2020).

While a great deal of research analyzes the decline in the liberal arts in recent decades, very little research analyzes the perceptions of liberal arts graduates. To gain a fuller understanding of graduate perceptions, a qualitative methodology was adopted for this study. Merriam and Tisdell (2017) describe qualitative research as being “interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (p. 6). The primary concern of a qualitative study is “understanding the meaning people have constructed” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2017, p. 15). The study’s guiding research questions included:

Does a liberal arts education prepare students to be successful in the workforce?

Do liberal arts graduates gain anything from their educational experience that they would have otherwise missed?

The qualitative data gathered for this study were produced from individual interviews with graduates of a private liberal arts university in Northeast Tennessee spanning from 2010-2013. Maximum variation was employed in selecting 11 participants, with the following majors represented: Accounting, Bible, business, communications, computer information systems, exercise science, history, humanities, math, nursing, psychology, and sociology. To further ensure validity and reliability, member checking and secondary coding were adopted.

Once all of the data were transcribed, the process of coding the data led to the identification of global themes and accompanying sub-themes (Cresswell, 2013).

Summary of Findings

For this study, individual interviews, spanning from 20-90 minutes in length, were the sole means of qualitative data collection. The coding process, with the help of a secondary coder, revealed four global themes across 11 interviews: (1) Types of Learning, (2) Types of Skills, (3) Employer Perceptions, and (4) Accessibility. Types of Learning and the accompanying sub-themes were coded 153 times; Types of Skills and the accompanying sub-themes were coded 51 times; Employer Perceptions and the accompanying sub-themes were coded 27 times; Accessibility and the accompanying sub-themes were coded 15 times.

Themes Regarding Types of Learning

As indicated by the data presented in Chapter Four, the most prominent perception theme across all interviews was the global theme of types of learning. The following sub-themes were identified: (1) holistic/interdisciplinary learning, (2) relational learning, (3) independent learning, (4) social-emotional learning, (5) exploratory learning, and (6) continuous learning. These themes all touched on the various types of learning that take place in a liberal arts classroom, with the most prominent sub-themes being the holistic/interdisciplinary approach to learning and relational learning.

Participants emphasized the holistic and interdisciplinary nature of a liberal arts education, using terms like “broad”, “balanced”, and “well-rounded” to describe their education. Every single participant highlighted the well-rounded nature of the liberal arts. Participant 5 used the term “broad” to describe their liberal arts education, sharing, “The liberal arts in general is

just a very broad education; you have opportunities to experience a broad spectrum of different skills and different classes, different subjects.”

Participants also highlighted the relational aspect of liberal arts education almost as many times as the holistic and interdisciplinary aspects of a liberal arts education. A unique feature of a liberal arts education, according to participants, is that learning occurs alongside professors. Participant 9 shared, “You don’t get that outside of a liberal arts education usually where you get to have undergraduate influence, where you’re getting to learn as they learn and having that active teacher as learner.” Participant 5 also reflected on the relational learning prominent within a liberal arts education, stating, “You have to have that relational experience. Someone has to develop you so that you can develop other people.” Participant 10 referred to this learning as the “cross-pollination” of ideas.

While independent learning may seem to conflict with the sub-theme of relational learning, participants emphasized the independent learning present within a liberal arts education, with many participants reflecting on the self-improvement and self-awareness produced in a liberal arts education. Participant 5 summarized their liberal arts education by stating, “I was able to understand why I thought the way I thought and why I do things that I do and then learn about all of these other people’s personalities. It all goes back to if you know yourself, you can understand and take the time to understand someone else.”

The social-emotional learning that participants identified was often described by the resulting skills of empathy and compassion, with Participant 4 identifying the social-emotional components of their learning as “one of the most formative elements” of their education. Participant 5 reflected on this learning by highlighting the servant-oriented approach to education that they witnessed, arguing that this approach is why they have been successful in their career.

Likewise, Participants 7 and 9 reflected on the approach to global citizenry that they have adopted as a result of their liberal arts education.

Another prominent sub-theme across the interviews was the idea of exploratory learning. Almost all of the participants voiced either that they entered college with no clear plans of study or that they have experienced multiple career changes since graduating college. Participants highlighted the exploratory learning that is prevalent in the liberal arts as a tool that helped them to navigate the unknowns of their educations and now their careers. For example, Participant 2 added a psychology minor because of this exploratory approach to learning, and Participant 3 was able to adjust their major multiple times during their undergraduate career as they discovered new areas of study to be passionate about.

The final sub-theme identified was continuous learning. Participant 2 reflected on the continuous learning that they were exposed to, noting that learning was continuously occurring, even outside of the classroom. Participant 4 also captured this idea of continuous learning by sharing that individuals must “continue to grow.” For Participant 6, this means that they have now gone back and reread many of the materials they were exposed to in undergrad, saying, “I think that I developed just a love for reading and a love for studying like art and a love for history.”

Themes Regarding Types of Skills

The second most prominent perception theme, as evidenced by the data presented in Chapter Four, was the global theme of the diverse types of skills that graduates of liberal arts institutions achieve. The following sub-themes were identified during the coding process: (1) communication and problem-solving, (2) critical thinking and questions, and (3) reflection. Because of the manner in which these skills were addressed across interviews, communication

and problem-solving have been reported as one skill, and critical thinking and questions have been reported as one skill.

Participants identified communication and problem-solving skills as more important than any other skill as a result of their liberal arts education. While participants reported gaining confidence in public speaking through speech classes and learning how to write well, thanks to the demands of their coursework, participants identified the greatest tool to strengthen their communication skills was the dialogue that happened within the classroom. Participants recognized that this dialogue was pervasive across degree programs. Participant 2, a computer science major, reflected on the dialogue that characterized their computer science classes. Participant 8 also emphasized the communication and problem-solving skills that they developed in undergrad and how those skills have equipped them for success in their graduate program, sharing that they learned not only how to write well but also how to research well.

Nearly as prominent as the sub-theme of communication and problem-solving was the sub-theme of critical thinking and questions, with participants suggesting that one of the greatest ways that they practice critical thinking in their daily lives is through asking good questions. Participant 10 described their liberal arts education as a quest for truth. Likewise, Participant 9 argued that education should help students to understand the thought process behind learning. Participant 7 described the skill of critical thinking and questioning by sharing that they are now able to think for themselves and develop their own opinions.

The final sub-theme identified was the theme of reflection. While fewer participants highlighted the importance of reflection, most of the students who identified reflection as a critical skill identified their capstone course as a key moment of reflection in their liberal arts education. Participant 2 shared that the capstone course instilled in them the skill of reflective

practice, and Participant 10 shared that the capstone course was “a very pivotal course,” shaping them in many ways. Beyond the capstone course, Participant 1 remembered keeping a reflective journal in some classes, and Participant 9 shared that students were encouraged to ponder and reflect before answering a question immediately.

Themes Regarding Employer Perceptions

Another global theme identified across interviews was the perceptions of those outside of the liberal arts, namely employers and graduate programs. This global theme was interesting as it was divided into two sub-themes: (1) academic preparedness and (2) “transplant shock”. Many participants were able to identify the conflicting perceptions that they have encountered since graduating.

The data revealed that participants who most readily identified generally positive perceptions were participants who pursued higher education. For this reason, the sub-theme was coded as academic preparedness. Participant 3, an example of academic preparedness, credited their liberal arts education for getting them into a Ph.D. program immediately after undergrad, saying, “I was a great student, and I love school. But that liberal arts background is what enabled me to go all over the place so well.” While the participant shared that there were some learning gaps when they first started their graduate program, they said, “I closed the gap pretty quickly. Like, in that first year, I struggled a little bit, and then I was able to pretty quickly close the gap because of the liberal arts and the academic foundation.” Similarly, Participant 4 shared the success that they have found in medical school because of their liberal arts education. They also shared that they can easily identify who in their cohort received a liberal arts degree and who did not. Finally, Participant 5 recognized that their liberal arts education has continued to equip them

in their life and career, stating, “I think the ongoing relationships that I have had with [the university] will probably even offer future opportunities for me.”

While participants identified general positive perceptions held by those outside of the liberal arts, participants mentioned more negative perceptions than positive. These perceptions reflect the idea of “transplant shock” for graduates of liberal arts institutions. Participant 2 suggested that liberal arts graduates would experience “transplant shock” upon leaving the liberal arts “bubble.” Participant 1 argued that a liberal arts degree will not help graduates to get a job. Participant 9 described this lack of understanding from others, saying, “There’s almost no appreciation for [the liberal arts] in the world... We’ve created a society that wants utility over everything. There is very little value for something in and of itself.” Another aspect of “transplant shock” that graduates identified was the lack of exposure that can come with a liberal arts degree. For example, Participant 11 shared that their spouse, who also graduated from the university in question, had to take additional coursework before enrolling in a master’s program. Similarly, Participant 4 shared that as a math major, they only had one full-time math professor.

Themes Regarding Accessibility

The final global theme identified across the interviews was the perception of accessibility. This theme was further broken down into two sub-themes: (1) cost and (2) privilege. While only four total participants highlighted the accessibility of a liberal arts education, a total of 15 mentions across this global theme occurred.

The cost of a liberal arts degree was identified as a serious drawback by four participants. Participant 7 even called a liberal arts degree a “luxury.” Similarly, Participant 3 shared that they have “some pretty severe regrets” over the cost of their liberal arts degree. Because of the cost,

Participant 9 shared that they would not be able to encourage a student to pursue a liberal arts degree unless they had the means to pay for it without going into exorbitant debt.

Only two participants identified the sub-theme of privilege, with Participant 9 saying, “You’re essentially putting yourself in a different echelon of humanity because not many people can afford to have that type of experience.” Participant 3 also identified that it is often the privileged who are able to pursue a liberal arts degree in the first place. Participant 7 hinted at this idea by commenting on the “us versus them” mentality that tends to be present in educated circles. The participant argued, “I don’t think you have to be college-educated to be attuned to the liberal arts.”

Discussion of Findings

If the liberal arts hope to maintain its place in the educational diversity of this nation, proponents for the liberal arts must give special attention to the perceptions of graduates. In reaching a fuller understanding of how those who received a liberal arts education perceive their education, educational leaders can better adapt to the changing educational landscape. Studies argue that it is critical that liberal arts graduates understand the purpose of a liberal arts approach to education (Elmore et al., 2006; Rodgers & Jackson, 2011; Peck & Jennings, 1989). In sharing their understanding of their liberal arts education, the 11 participants shared observations that produced four key areas of discussion: (1) the benefits of multiple types of learning, (2) the benefits of multiple types of skills, (3) the challenges and disadvantages of employer perceptions, and (4) the challenges of accessibility.

Benefits of Multiple Types of Learning

All study participants highlighted the multiple types of learning that they were exposed to as a part of their liberal arts education. These types of learning included the following: (1)

holistic/interdisciplinary learning, (2) relational learning, (3) independent learning, (4) social-emotional learning, (5) exploratory learning, and (6) continuous learning. The breadth of a liberal arts education is captured by these findings.

The holistic and interdisciplinary learning present within a liberal arts curriculum sets it apart from other educational philosophies, according to participants. Godwin and Altbach (2016) distinguish between a multidisciplinary curriculum and an interdisciplinary curriculum that is characteristic of the liberal arts. They differentiate between these two approaches by suggesting that a multidisciplinary approach requires students to take general education courses, whereas the goal of an interdisciplinary approach to education is synthesis. This concept of synthesis was captured by Participant 7, who stated that their liberal arts education gave them the ability to “think independently and freely make conclusions about information.”

Another term often used by participants to describe their holistic liberal arts education was the term “broad” or “well-rounded.” Michael Roth, in an interview with Valerie Strauss (2023) for *The Washington Post*, captured this idea by stating, “This form of learning...combines the acquisition of specific skills (such as literacy and numeracy) with understanding how those skills fit into broad contexts.” As the largest sub-theme coded under the global theme of multiple types of learning, it is evident that liberal arts graduates perceive a more holistic approach to education to be one of the greatest gifts of a liberal arts degree.

The relational learning characteristic of the liberal arts connects nicely with Mead’s theory of functionalism, which highlights the importance of social discourse to reach common understanding (Troyer, 1946). This type of learning was nearly as pervasive across interviews as holistic/interdisciplinary learning, with all of the participants reflecting on the integration of relational learning into their liberal arts education. The participants emphasized the importance

of dialogue in the classroom, not only amongst peers but also with professors. Participant 9 shared that learning was happening alongside professors, and they argued that that type of learning does not occur outside of a liberal arts classroom. Participant 5 also emphasized the importance of relational learning, sharing that a liberal arts education provides relational experiences where an individual can be developed and then they, in turn, can develop others. The research aligns with these findings, with Ferrall (2011) describing a liberal arts education as “learning as an act of community.”

This dialogue characteristic of relational learning continued outside of the classroom, according to Participant 2, who shared, “[The professors] were passionate about [learning], and they made it seem real. They made it seem like it was workable to be doing what they were doing, and they kind of led you along in how they thought about things...you were learning a lot more than you realized.” Similarly, Participant 9 recognized that the relational aspect of their education has equipped them to now relate and communicate with others outside of the educational sphere. Watson and McConnell (2018) have celebrated the skills that are developed as a result of relational learning as some of the most important skills looked for by employers and hiring managers. Likewise, Hart Research Associates (2013) reports that 93% of employers consider an applicant’s communication skills to be more important than their degree.

Somewhat paradoxically, participants also identified independent learning as a key facet of a liberal arts education. While they celebrated the relational aspect of learning that is prominent in a liberal arts classroom, they also identified that a liberal arts education equips students to be independent learners. Participant 3 described this independent learning as “a willingness to let myself evolve.” Similarly, Participant 6 shared that their liberal arts education led to self-improvement and self-awareness. Stated differently, Participant 9 shared that a liberal

arts approach to education “forms you as a person.” Rose (2015) captured the individualistic nature of a liberal arts philosophy, sharing that “the liberal disciplines train students to perceive the immanent rational order of creation.” Stated another way, the liberal arts allow one to not only form one’s mind but also to know one’s mind.

Participants also celebrated the social-emotional learning that shapes a liberal arts curriculum. They emphasized the terms empathy and compassion across the interviews, with Participant 4 identifying their social-emotional learning as “one of the most formative elements” of their education. A 1998 study at Grinnell College in Iowa produced similar results, with students highlighting the humanness of their education (Elmore et al., 2006). Participant 8 described their social-emotional learning by saying, “I think that I learned how to read, research, and write from a place of curiosity and openness, instead of preconceived, you know, confirmation bias.”

This openness in evolving one’s understanding of the world aligns with the theoretical framework of functionalism (Troyer, 1946). According to Mead’s theory, a common understanding is achieved through social discourse. Littlejohn and Evans (2006) highlight the concept of social-emotional learning by reflecting on the servant-oriented approach of the liberal arts. Humphreys (2014) also identifies the importance of social-emotional learning by identifying the responsible and informed citizens that a liberal arts tradition produces, saying, “The liberal arts are essential to building our nation’s intellectual capital and the global leadership that comes along with it.” The reality of this claim is captured by the data reported by Gitter, MacDonald, and Greenleaf (2018), who state that liberal arts institutions “produce a disproportionate share of leaders.”

According to participants, one of the greatest gifts of a liberal arts education is the exploratory learning that takes place. Many participants began their time at the selected university with no clear sense of what they wanted to study. Because of the vast range of subjects that they were exposed to as a part of the liberal arts curriculum, they were able to discover new areas of interest. This discovery of knowledge continues to align with Mead's theory of functionalism (Troyer, 1946), as students explore the world around them. For Participant 2, this meant the addition of a psychology minor, and for Participant 3, it meant multiple degree changes before graduation.

Participants suggested that the benefits of an exploratory education continue beyond graduation. Likewise, Guth (2020) reports that a hallmark of a liberal arts graduate is adaptability. Participant 4 exhibited adaptability when sharing that they worked multiple careers before ultimately enrolling in medical school. Participant 5 shared a similar experience, saying, "I was able to take a lot of different classes and meet a lot of different people, have different opportunities, so that I figured out what I wanted to do. That really shaped me and made me available for different opportunities." Finally, Participant 8 emphasized that because of the exploratory nature of their liberal arts education, they are able to navigate life without fear. This attitude mirrors that of Nussbaum (1997), who described the liberally educated as "sensitive and alert citizens."

The final type of learning identified by participants was continuous learning. While Participant 6 did not appreciate their liberal arts education while they were in school, they shared that since graduation, they have returned to many of the materials they were exposed to in undergrad. They posited that their liberal arts education laid the foundation for continued learning beyond graduation. Participant 9 also shared that they see themselves as a perpetual

student, saying, “I feel like I’m using how I was formed in that process.” These findings align with the case presented by Littlejohn and Evans (2006), who suggest that the goal of a liberal arts school is to produce “skilled, lifelong, independent learners.” Likewise, the continuous nature of learning captures the heart of Mead’s theory of functionalism (Troyer, 1946).

Benefits of Multiple Types of Skills

Participants also highlighted the multiple types of skills that they fostered as a part of their liberal arts education. An analysis of the data revealed three primary skills: (1) communication and problem-solving, (2) critical thinking and questions, and (3) reflection. Because of the natural coexistence of communication and problem-solving, they have been categorized as a single skill. Likewise, critical thinking and questions have been categorized as one skill.

An analysis of interview transcripts revealed that communication and problem-solving often work together, and numerous studies have cited the importance of developing these skills in students to make them marketable to employers (Guth, 2020; Hart Research Associates, 2013; Watson & McConnell, 2018; Ferrall, 2011). The hope is that liberal arts graduates will be global citizens equipped to solve real-world problems (Strauss, 2023; Humphreys, 2014). This hope aligns with Mead’s theory of functionalism (Troyer, 1946). As evidenced by the data, Participant 6 asserted that their liberal arts education greatly improved their communication skills through their writing. Likewise, Participant 8 shared that they have been able to utilize their communication and problem-solving skills as a graduate student, where they are expected to not only write well but also research well. Participant 3 also shared that the development of their communication skills enabled them to be successful in their Ph.D. program.

Critical thinking and questioning, ideas present in Mead's theory of functionalism (Troyer, 1946), were also skills readily found across interviews, with Participant 10 suggesting that these are the ultimate aims of a liberal arts education. The participant described it as the "quest for truth," which reflected the sentiments of Thompson (2015), who argued that the liberal arts are a "quest for knowledge and truth." Similarly, Participant 7 shared that a liberal arts education helps one to understand not only the how but also the why, saying, "[The liberal arts] support you in being an independent thinker and challenge you not just to intake and digest information, but to think about it critically." Michael Roth, in an interview with Valerie Strauss (2023) for *The Washington Post*, explained it this way, "Rather than being just trained how to be a cog in a machine, you are taught to understand how machines work within the systems in which they (and you) are embedded." These ideas align nicely with Mead's theory of functionalism, particularly his commitment to social discourse (Troyer, 1946).

An aspect of critical thinking, transferability, has been identified as another key benefit of a liberal arts education. Littlejohn and Evans (2006) argue that the transferability of skills is what makes liberal arts graduates successful. Participant 3 found this to be true in their experience with graduate schools, sharing, "I closed the gap pretty quickly. Like, in that first year, I struggled a little bit, and then I was able to pretty quickly close the gap because of the liberal arts and the academic foundation."

Participants also identified the practice of reflection as a key benefit of a liberal arts education. Reflection is embedded into the very curriculum of the selected liberal arts institution, as students are required to complete a capstone course at the end of their undergraduate career. Participant 4 shared that it was "a very pivotal course" in their education that shaped them in many ways. Participant 1 also reflected on other opportunities for reflection, sharing that one of

their classes required a reflective journal. Additionally, Participant 9 shared that reflection and taking time to ponder one's responses was encouraged in the liberal arts classroom. Michael Roth, in an interview with Valerie Strauss (2023), refers to this practice as "holistic thinking." The skill of reflection is also valuable to employers. Watson and McConnell (2018) report that employers are looking for candidates who demonstrate "flexibility, mental agility, ethics, resilience, systems thinking, communication, and critical thinking." Employers are looking for candidates who exemplify Mead's theory of functionalism (Troyer, 1946).

Challenges and Advantages of Employer Perceptions

While the majority of participants' interviews were spent sharing their own personal perceptions of their liberal arts education, each participant also reflected on the perceptions of others. This global theme was divided into two sub-themes: (1) academic preparedness and (2) "transplant shock". This is the one global theme where participants seemed split in their thinking, with some participants even voicing conflicting perceptions that they have encountered.

Interestingly, most of the participants who pursued higher education reported more positive perceptions than their peers, namely in terms of their perceived academic preparedness. For example, Participant 4 credited their liberal arts background for their current success in medical school. Additionally, the participant noted that they could easily identify which of their peers received a liberal arts education and which ones did not. Similarly, Participant 7, a graduate professor, asserted that they can easily identify which of their students received a liberal arts degree.

Participant 5 stipulated that their liberal arts degree has opened countless doors for them and will continue to do so, saying, "I think the ongoing relationships that I have had with [the university] will probably even offer future opportunities for me." Likewise, Participant 9 shared

that they were hired into their current position because of their liberal arts degree. Research supports the claims of these participants, with an article from the *Business Mirror* titled “Yes, Employers Do Value Liberal Arts Degrees” (2019) reporting that 80% of employers prefer applicants with a strong liberal arts foundation. Guth (2020) likewise reports that employers continuously share that liberal arts graduates perform better in the workforce because they are more adaptable and more capable of creative communication.

The participants of this study, however, mentioned more negative perceptions from employers than positive perceptions. The negative perceptions of employers have been coded as “transplant shock” for the purposes of this study. For Participants 3 and 4, this “transplant shock” presented itself as a lack of exposure, which was a serious drawback. Participant 3 did not have ample opportunities to conduct undergraduate research, and Participant 4, a math major, only had one full-time math professor. Participant 11 also mentioned this lack of exposure, sharing that their spouse had to take additional coursework before enrolling in a graduate program.

The experiences of Participant 1 seem to directly contradict the existing research, which attests to the appeal of liberal arts graduates for employers, with the participant claiming, “It’s not going to help you in your job.” The participant shared that their principal does not care about their liberal arts education. Participants 2, 6, and 10 also wondered if employers could recognize the value of a liberal arts degree when hiring employees. Participant 9 asserted that “there’s almost no appreciation for [the liberal arts] in the world.” The participant suggests that the shift to a more utilitarian mindset has negatively impacted the way the world and employers perceive the liberal arts.

Michael Roth, in an interview with Valerie Strauss (2023) for *The Washington Post*, adopts a different outlook, stating, “The jobs of the future and the problems confronting our

world today cannot be tackled by technical specialization alone. Environmental degradation, artificial intelligence, public health, increasing inequality, international public tensions—these are complex areas that demand the kind of holistic thinking characteristic of liberal education.”

Kaplan (2023), however, reports that from 2017 to 2021, the percentage of jobs that required a college degree dropped from 51% to 44% and that adults ages 18-29 who rank college as very important dropped from 74% to 41%. Kaplan (2023) suggests that several factors have led to this shift such as the competitive labor market, rising tuition costs, online alternatives, and changing job roles. Anderson (2023) even reports that many companies, such as Apple, Tesla, IBM, Delta Airlines, and Hilton no longer require a college degree for an interview. These conflicting perspectives pose serious problems for proponents of the liberal arts. Liberal arts universities must acknowledge in their recruitment efforts that not only must they tout the benefits of a liberal arts education, but they must also address the negative perceptions of the public.

The Challenges of Accessibility

A final challenge for liberal arts advocates to overcome is accessibility. Participants identified two accompanying sub-themes: (1) cost and (2) privilege. While only four participants emphasized the lack of accessibility to a liberal arts education, the existing research has much to say about the accessibility of the liberal arts.

Hu (2017) not only recognizes that the liberal arts are experiencing a decline because of a shift from holistic education to careerism but also recognizes that the cost of a liberal arts degree is a major drawback. Hu (2017) reports that 54% of liberal arts degree recipients have over \$20,000 in college debt. Participant 3 shared that they have “some pretty severe regrets” over the amount of debt they accrued to receive their liberal arts degree. Participant 9 even shared that they could not, in good conscience, recommend someone to attend a liberal arts institution unless

they could afford to do so without going into heavy debt. Participants 3 and 9 also identified the privilege that is inherent in a liberal arts institution, with Participant 9 saying that liberal arts students are setting themselves up as a “different echelon of humanity.”

Chen and Min (2021) urge liberal arts institutions to address the issue of accessibility if they are to remain relevant in the changing academic landscape, saying, “Practical liberal education does not mean abandoning all aspects of the traditional model, but better adapting to the diverse needs of American society more comprehensively.” While Chen and Min (2021) recognize that a liberal arts education has historically often been reserved for the elite, they argue that it must be made available to all students as it is essential for global citizenship.

Limitations of the Study

This study was limited in four key areas. First, this is not a comparative study. This study is solely interested in identifying the strengths of a liberal arts education. Second, all qualitative data was collected from graduates of a private Christian university in Northeast Tennessee. While the selected university is a Christian liberal arts university, the focus has remained on its liberal arts foundation rather than its Christian worldview. Third, since all qualitative data was collected from graduates of a small liberal arts university, it is impossible to differentiate between what findings are due to a liberal arts education and which are due to a small learning environment. Fourth, only graduates between the years of 2010 and 2013 were sampled.

Conclusions

This study’s primary conclusion is that a liberal arts education positively impacts graduates. However, the cost of a liberal arts degree and the perceptions of the public pose a serious threat to the future of the liberal arts. Nine of the eleven participants voiced overwhelming support for a liberal arts approach to education, and yet even the most passionate

advocates for liberal arts acknowledged the issues surrounding accessibility. These results should both encourage and enlighten liberal arts educators.

The majority of participants felt the positive impact of a liberal arts education. The participants spoke with a great deal of passion and steadfastness in their support of the liberal arts. However, the cost and privilege that a liberal arts education entails cannot be denied, particularly as enrollment continues to decline. Moving forward, liberal arts institutions would benefit from seeking out the insights their graduates have to offer. These are the individuals who can attest to the abundant gifts a liberal arts education provides, but they can also provide firsthand insight into areas for improvement.

In understanding the perceptions of current graduates, liberal arts institutions can understand the current demographic they are serving. Additionally, they can also identify gaps in their audience. Who historically has been denied access to a liberal arts education? How can the issue of accessibility be resolved? If a liberal arts education is essential in the production of good global citizens, proponents for the liberal arts should seek to make the liberal arts accessible to all and not just the select few.

Recommendations for Practice

As previously mentioned, while the participants overwhelmingly voiced support for the liberal arts, there are key areas for improvement, allowing for increased enrollment. These recommendations do not merely apply to the selected university of this study. Rather, these recommendations can be applied across liberal arts institutions in response to declining enrollment. These recommendations stem directly from this study's research questions:

Does a liberal arts education prepare students to be successful in the workforce?

Do liberal arts graduates gain anything from their educational experience that they would have otherwise missed?

First, professors at liberal arts institutions are encouraged to receive professional development in the liberal arts so that they can integrate liberal arts practices in their classrooms regardless of the area of study. As evidenced by the interviews, some professors captured the liberal arts philosophy well in their classrooms even if they were in a traditionally non-liberal arts field, and yet others failed to incorporate a liberal arts approach to education in their classrooms. By fixing this inconsistency, students, regardless of their course of study, can recognize the purpose and benefits of their liberal arts education.

To ensure that liberal arts institutions prepare graduates for the workforce it is also recommended that liberal arts schools allocate funds to STEM fields, resulting in undergraduate research opportunities, internships and mentorships, state-of-the-art labs, and qualified professors. Participants who majored in STEM fields voiced a concern that sometimes STEM courses do not carry equal importance at a liberal arts institution. For this reason, liberal arts institutions are encouraged to build STEM programs that adhere to the same standards of excellence as the more traditionally liberal arts programs. Staffing for STEM courses should carry equal weight as staffing for liberal arts courses. Additionally, all coursework should align with career readiness standards.

To prepare liberal arts graduates for the workforce, liberal arts universities are also encouraged to build relationships with employers to ensure that companies understand the benefits of hiring liberal arts graduates. While the research indicates that employers largely value the skills of the liberal arts graduate, that does not mean that every employer will be aware of the benefits of a liberal arts educated candidate. For this reason, liberal arts institutions are

encouraged to focus their efforts in building relationships with regional employers as they will likely be the largest outlet for career success for graduates.

Regarding the unique quality of their liberal arts education, participants consistently shared that they felt that their education offered them opportunities that they would have otherwise missed. However, they also were able to acknowledge opportunities that they missed by not attending a larger university. As already alluded to, liberal arts institutions are encouraged to promote undergraduate research opportunities and to give special attention to staffing qualified professors across fields of study. Additionally, some participants shared that they felt like they had a lack of mentorship opportunities as a student. For this reason, liberal arts schools are encouraged to create forums for graduates to connect with current students so that graduates can mentor current students by providing real-world evidence for the benefits of a liberal arts education. A liberal arts education is largely what a student makes of it, so students should be able to connect with graduates to learn firsthand the best ways to harness their liberal arts education.

Recommendations for Further Study

The analysis of the data produced some incidental findings as well as recommendations for further study. Given the findings of this study, liberal arts institutions are encouraged to evolve their recruitment efforts to include more marketing messages fueled by graduate voices. Prospective students want to hear from graduates to learn what a liberal arts graduate is capable of (i.e., transferability of skills, problem-solving, critical thinking, etc.). Liberal arts institutions are also encouraged to regularly follow up with graduates to assess their evolving understanding of a liberal arts education post-graduation.

In considering recommendations for further study, scholars are encouraged to conduct research to discover ways to lower the cost of attending liberal arts institutions. As evidenced by the interviews conducted as a part of this study, the cost of a liberal arts degree is a major obstacle to prospective students. Second, scholars are encouraged to research the “transplant shock” that graduates of small, liberal arts universities may experience when they enter the workforce or graduate school. As mentioned earlier, this study was not comparative in nature; however, further research would benefit from adopting a comparative approach. As one of the participants highlighted, the shift from a small, close-knit community to a large corporate workforce can be jarring for graduates. Additionally, because of the small nature of the selected liberal arts university, it is recommended that further research consider the effectiveness of a liberal arts education at a larger institution. A third area of study would be to continue to research the perceptions of employers and graduate schools of a liberal arts approach to education, particularly as attitudes towards higher education continue to evolve.

Since this study followed a qualitative approach, it is also recommended that further research adopt a quantitative methodology by studying graduates’ success post-college by considering their salary and debt. It would be interesting to see how graduates’ self-reported success aligns with the quantitative data. One of the limitations of this study was that it was focused on a liberal arts approach to education rather than a Christian liberal arts approach to education. For this reason, it is recommended that further studies research the unique perceptions held by graduates of Christian liberal arts institutions. Finally, since participants in this study spanned from 2010-2013, it is recommended that further studies adopt a longitudinal methodology to study the evolving attitudes of graduates as the years pass following graduation.

Summary

This study aimed to investigate graduates' perceptions of their liberal arts education in a selected private, liberal arts university in Northeast Tennessee. The study participants included graduates from 2010-2013 spanning a variety of majors and current careers. This study provided great insight into graduate perceptions of the liberal arts. These perceptions were discovered by conducting individual interviews. The emerging data included graduates' perceptions, positive and negative, concerning the multiple types of learning they were exposed to, the types of skills they received, the perceptions of employers, and issues of accessibility.

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Appendix A*Milligan IRB Approval Letter*

Date: October 2, 2023

Principal Investigator: **Alexandra Kees**, Graduate Students, Milligan University
From: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Milligan University
Project: *The Effectiveness of a Liberal Arts Education*
IRB Tracking Number: 2023-25
IRB Approval Number: **Exe2312151520**
Subject: **Declaration of Exemption**

The Milligan University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your research application and has determined that your proposed research is exempt from further review based on federal guidelines provided in 45 CFR 46.104(d)(2)(i) in that you have demonstrated your research to be:

Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) and The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects cannot be readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subject.

You are expected to conduct your research in accordance with the research plan that was presented for review. Substantive modifications to your research plan will require another formalized review of your plan by our office. Please remember that while we are not specifically reviewing your informed consent, all researchers should provide potential participants with an informed consent statement that includes all pertinent information.

Best wishes as you conduct your research! Please feel free to contact the IRB office by email should you have any questions; IRB@milligan.edu

On behalf of the IRB Committee,

David D Gibbons, Ph.D.
Chair, Institutional Review Board
Milligan University



Appendix B*Interview Question Guide*

1. What is your current career?
2. A liberal arts education entails integration of a student's intended area of study with courses on art, communication, composition, history, religion, science, and sociology with the objective of producing global citizens equipped to solve real-world problems. Tell me about your experiences with liberal arts education. Did you enjoy the liberal arts approach to education? Why or why not?
3. Give me an example of a skill that you earned as a result of your liberal arts education. What are the opportunities you have had to use this skill?
4. How would you describe or define the liberal arts education that you received?
5. What are your perceptions of the benefits and disadvantages of a liberal arts education?
6. Do you feel like you missed out on any opportunities by attending a liberal arts university?
7. Would you want your children to receive a liberal arts education? Why or why not?
8. Did your liberal arts education impart any skills that an alternative education would have missed?
9. Did your liberal arts education prepare you for life after school? Why or why not?
10. Tell me about the learning activities that you engaged in that were liberal arts focused. Did those prove helpful to you? Why or why not?

Appendix C

Informed Consent Form

MILLIGAN UNIVERSITY Research Participant Informed Consent Form

Invitation to Participate

You are invited to participate in a Milligan University sponsored research study. This form is part of a process called "informed consent" to allow you to understand this study before deciding whether or not to participate.

This research study is recruiting 2010-2013 Milligan University Alums to participate in this study. The expected duration for participation is 4 weeks.

This study is being conducted by Alexandra Kees (the Principal Investigator). The Principal Investigator is associated with Milligan as a graduate student.

Research Objective/Purpose:

The purpose of this research study is to understand the perceptions of liberal arts' graduates by answering the following questions. Does a liberal arts education prepare students to be successful in the workforce? Do liberal arts graduates gain anything from their unique educational experience that they would have otherwise missed? To answer these questions, a qualitative research methodology will be adopted. Participants in this study will participate in individual interviews. Member checking and a secondary coder will be utilized to establish validity and reliability..

Procedures:

The procedures used for this research study are described below.

- Schedule a Zoom Interview (duration 1 hour).
- Within a week of conducting the interview, participants will be asked to complete member checking by reviewing the transcript of their interview to establish validity and reliability.
- The researcher alongside a secondary coder will then analyze interviews to identify emerging themes.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Participation in this study is voluntary. Any decision not to participate in this study will have no penalty or loss of benefits to which you would otherwise be entitled if you were not invited to participate. Additionally, you may discontinue participation in this study at any time, without penalty or loss of benefits to which you would otherwise be entitled if you were not invited to participate.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:

Risks: Participation in this research study involves the following risks or minimal risks. The only foreseeable risk to participants in this study is feelings of discomfort that may arise in the interview process. Participants will have the option to back out of the study at any time.

MILLIGAN UNIVERSITY
Research Participant Informed Consent Form

Benefits: Participation in this research study involves the following benefits or potential benefits. These benefits, however, are not guaranteed.

The liberal arts have seen a drastic decline in recent decades. By providing clarification on the perceptions of graduates, this study can provide a response to the decline in liberal arts. By understanding the attitudes of graduates, liberal arts schools can better learn how to market the education they are offering. This study seeks to determine new and engaging ways to promote the liberal arts to prospective students highlighting the strengths of a liberal arts education.

Compensation:

This research study:

- Does not involve any compensation.
- Does involve compensation as described below:
 <Describe in detail any payment, gifts, or reimbursement you are providing to participants and how such compensation will be made available as per the Research Proposal.>

Privacy:

By participating in this research study:

- Your personal identifying information will be **maintained confidentially** and will not be used in association with any other research project. Your study-related research data will be used and reported as an aggregate only and will not be individually identifiable.
- Your responses to the survey will be **completely anonymous** and no personal identifying information will be associated with your responses. Your survey responses will be used and reported as an aggregate only.
- Your responses to the survey/interview will be **maintained confidentially** as follows: <Describe alternate criteria. For example, qualitative studies where some data is individualized but names and data are handled differently than the two options above.>

Research data for this study will be maintained securely by the Milligan Investigator (or Milligan designee) for a period of 3 years, at which time it will be securely discarded.

Secondary Research

(NOTE: Research conducted by Milligan Investigators typically does not involve future, secondary research initiatives.)

This research study:

- Does not involve** storage or use of the research data (or specimens) for future, secondary research.
- May involve** storage and/or use of the research data (or specimens) for future, secondary research.
- Your personal identifying information will be maintained as described in the "Privacy" section.
 - Data/specimens will be stored and used within <#> years.
 - The future, secondary research will be limited to <describe the type of research that is anticipated and permitted for this future, secondary research>.
 - By initialing/dating in the space provided, you give broad consent to for the storage and/or future use of the studies research data and/or specimens: Initials: _____ Date: _____

MILLIGAN UNIVERSITY
Research Participant Informed Consent Form

Research Participant's Rights and Responsibilities

As a research participant the following rights and responsibilities apply:

- If applicable, significant new findings developed during the course of this research, which may relate to your willingness to continue participation in the study will be provided to you during the course of the study by the Principal Investigator.
- To withdrawal from the research study while it is still in-progress, contact the Principal Investigator to ensure orderly termination of your participation.
- For a summary of the findings or conclusions from this research study, you may contact the Principal Investigator.
- For questions about this research study, your rights and responsibilities, or a research-related injury, you may contact the Principal Investigator and/or Milligan's Institutional Review Board.

Contacts:

Principal Investigator:
 Alexandra Kees, Graduate Student
agkees@milligan.edu
 423.461.8330

Milligan Institutional Review Board:
IRB@Milligan.edu

Office of IRE:
IRE@milligan.edu
 423-461-8414

Faculty Advisor:
 Mark Dula, Associate Professor of
 Education
medula@milligan.edu
 423.461.8746

Statement of Consent:

I have read and understand the Informed Consent information presented for participation in this research study.

- This study **does not** require written consent. As applicable to the study:
- By clicking the provided **link** or **"I consent" button**, I am 18 years or older and I agree to participate in this research study.
 - By **replying "I consent" via email** to the Investigator, I am 18 years or older and I agree to participate in this research study.
- This study **requires** written consent. By **signing below**, I (or my minor child) agree to participate in this research study.

Participant's Name (Printed): _____
 Participant's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Parent/Guardian (Printed): _____
 Parent/Guardian Signature: _____ Date: _____

Appendix D

Deliverable

THE LIBERAL ARTS

Presented by: Alexandra Kees
Milligan University
April 2024

A liberal arts education entails *integration* of a student’s intended area of study with courses on art, communication, composition, history, religion, science, and sociology with the objective of producing *global citizens* equipped to solve *real-world problems*.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

1. Does a liberal arts education prepare students to be successful in the workforce?
2. Do liberal arts graduates gain anything from their educational experience that they would have otherwise missed?

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

The purpose of this study is to investigate graduates’ perceptions of their liberal arts education. Specifically, this study seeks to understand whether liberal arts graduates feel prepared for the workforce and life because of their liberal arts degree. This qualitative data will inform the strategies of liberal arts institutions as they seek to increase enrollment in response to continued declines.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK:

According to George Herbert Mead and the theory of functionalism, intelligent human behavior is inherently social, and common understanding is achieved through social discourse.

RESEARCH DESIGN

A qualitative research design was adopted with the implementation of open-ended questions for one-on-one interviews with 2010-2013 graduates from a small, liberal arts institution in Northeast Tennessee.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE:

- Professional Development for Professors
- Allocate funds for STEM
- Coursework aligning with career readiness standards
- Build relationships with regional employers

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RESEARCH:

- Cost of Attendance
- “Transplant Shock”
- Perceptions of Employers and Graduate Schools
- Quantitative Approach
- Christian Liberal Arts Approach
- Longitudinal Methodology

GLOBAL THEMES

- Types of Learning
- Types of Skills
- Employer Perceptions
- Accessibility

Appendix E

Committee Approval

Milligan University Dissertation Defense Approval Form

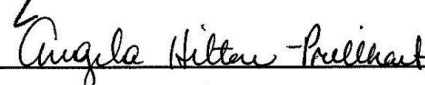
Candidate Name: Alex Kees
Date of Defense: April 10, 2024
Dissertation Title:


Final Approval of Dissertation Defense:

A signature below indicates committee members agree with the following:

- 1) Agreement that the dissertation meets with the committee's approval.
- 2) Agreement that the oral defense of the dissertation was successful.

Dissertation Chair Signature/Date:  4/22/2024

Committee Member Signature/Date:  04/22/2024

Committee Member Signature/Date:  4/22/2024

Research Director Signature/Date:  4/22/2024

Area Chair Signature/Date:  04/22/2024