What, in the years ahead, are to be the roles of the liberal arts and sciences at WWU?

The liberal arts and sciences are designed to help students reflect on all their roles -- at work, at home, and as part of our democracy. As the introduction to Western’s general university requirements (GURs) state, “liberal education enables people to lead fuller and more interesting lives, to perceive and to understand more of the world around and within themselves, and to participate more intelligently, sensitively and deliberately in shaping that world.” But as the world changes, we must ask ourselves whether the historical role of the liberal arts and sciences, at Western and throughout higher education, will change.

WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT THE HISTORY AND CURRENT STATUS OF THE LIBERAL ARTS AND SCIENCES

- For centuries, the heart of the undergraduate college experience was exposure to the liberal arts. Since WWII, this has meant two things: 1) a general education in the arts and sciences (through requirements to take courses in different fields) for all students, and 2) for some, a major in an academic discipline such as history, chemistry, math, or English.
- Increasingly, policy leaders are skeptical of the value of a liberal arts and sciences education. Under President Bush, The Spelling Commission argued that the primary purpose of college education is to develop students’ “intellectual capital,” or, in other words, to prepare graduates for high-paying jobs. The Obama administration’s “College Scorecard” has taken the same approach by suggesting that colleges should be evaluated on their graduates’ employment record and average salaries. At the state level, governors and legislators have promoted “high-demand” degrees directly related to immediate economic needs.
- Nationally, the percent of majors in the social sciences and humanities trails those in the natural sciences and in business.
- Despite consistent enrollments, public defunding of higher education has meant that students must be more focused on economic concerns. A decade ago, the public covered about 70% of the cost of educating a Western student. Today that number is below 40%, even as the cost per student has remained constant. Students are therefore forced to think of college as a private career investment. To some, such a mindset reduces the importance of the liberal arts and sciences.
- Employers consistently state that what they want most in graduates are high-end skills and capacities: the ability to think critically, to analyze data, to be creative, to write effectively, to understand and work with other cultures and people. Studies demonstrate that these skills are developed more effectively within the liberal arts and sciences than in more professional fields. A recent survey concludes that employers overwhelmingly recommend a liberal education for their own children and for those that they hire.
- The relation between majors and future earnings is unclear. Engineering is consistently a high-earner, but for the rest, it’s a toss-up, with liberal arts and sciences majors often providing salaries equal or more to those in professional fields. The choice of major may not be as closely tied to economic success as many students believe.
WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT THE LIBERAL ARTS AND SCIENCES AT WESTERN

- At Western, roughly 16.4% of undergraduates major in the sciences (life, physical, environmental); 44.6% in the humanities and social sciences; 5.7% in education; 5.9% in the visual and performing arts; 3.7% in health-related fields; and 13.6% in business or marketing.

- Generally, less than 10% of Western sophomores surveyed strongly agree that “taking GUR courses gives me useful skills” and around 20% strongly agree that “completing courses in a broad range of disciplines is something I would choose to do myself even if it were not required.” GUR courses constitute the primary area of engagement with the liberal arts and sciences for those who do not major in one of the disciplines included in that phrase.

Additional questions to consider in response to this question

1. What do you see as the role of the liberal arts and sciences in today’s society?
2. How necessary and important do you believe it is for all Western graduates to have a general education in the liberal arts and sciences as part of their core curriculum?
3. What changes would you make to improve liberal arts and sciences education at Western?
4. How might you introduce first-generation students to the value of the liberal arts and sciences?