

The Boston Globe

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 19, 2025

Editorial

Can Brandeis make liberal arts relevant again?

Brandeis University recently announced a \$25 million investment to “reinvent” its liberal arts education and make it more workforce-oriented. Ask Brandeis University President Arthur Levine why the liberal arts needs reinvention, and he offers a history lesson.

At medieval universities, Levine told the editorial board, liberal arts meant the *trivium* and *quadrivium*, Latin terms comprising seven disciplines, among them logic and rhetoric, arithmetic, and astronomy. When Harvard University was founded in 1636, it taught Latin, Greek, and Syriac, languages Christian ministers would have needed to know to understand religious texts. Over the years, liberal arts evolved to encompass more modern subjects.

“The liberal arts change with the times and the state of human knowledge,” Levine said. He said liberal arts have always combined book learning with what different generations considered to be practical skills — or as he put it, “one foot in the library and one foot in the street.”

Today, higher education is in flux. Demographic shifts mean colleges are competing for a shrinking pool of high school graduates. Students are increasingly seeking schools and majors that give them a strong return on investment. A report by the American Enterprise Institute found that as undergraduate enrollment falls, students are seeking higher-quality institutions and higher-wage majors like engineering, nursing, and computer science over English and history. As workplaces evolve to use new technology, like artificial intelligence, students are searching for those skills.



GAELEN MORSE/BRANDEIS UNIVERSITY STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Brandeis’s attempt to maintain a liberal arts foundation while making education more workforce-relevant is worth watching as other schools also try to adapt to the changing academic landscape.

At Brandeis, administrators will give every student both a career advisor and an academic adviser when they arrive on campus. The university is revamping its curriculum to focus on applied knowledge. It’s designed four distinct schools in different curriculum areas — like business and economics, or arts, humanities, and culture. In addition to a traditional transcript, students will get a second transcript reflecting “competencies” — specific skills gained through classes or through research, internships, or extracurricular activities. Levine said the changes are not about

moving toward vocational education but updating a liberal arts curriculum to reflect the skills students need in a “global digital knowledge economy.”

In its pivot, Brandeis draws on a history of New England schools seeking to be at the forefront of workforce-oriented curriculum. Northeastern University, for example, transformed itself over the years from a working-class commuter school to an elite private university with global reach. One key to its success is its co-op program, through which students get work experience — and networking — while in school.

In 2025, around 12,900 Northeastern undergraduate and graduate students were accepted into co-op positions with more than 4,600 employers worldwide. According to the school, 96 percent of 2024 Northeastern graduates got a job or

enrolled in graduate school within nine months of graduation, and 58 percent were offered a job from a previous co-op employer.

Another — very different — school that's doubled down on its internship program is Endicott College in Beverly. Endicott, originally founded as a women's junior college, is today a four-year, regional liberal arts university with an acceptance rate of more than 70 percent. At a time when some less selective schools are foundering, Endicott has seen enrollment rise. In 2014, it enrolled around 2,900 undergraduates and 960 graduate students. Ten years later, it enrolled around 3,400 undergraduates and 1,200 graduate students.

What makes Endicott stand out is experiential learning. Students are required to complete two internships during summer or winter breaks their freshman and sophomore years, then one semester-long, four-day-a-week internship senior year. According to Endicott, 55 percent of 2024 graduates

were offered a job from an internship site.

Workplace needs also shape Endicott's curriculum. For example, Endicott executive vice president Bryan Cain said administrators in the undergraduate nursing school realized through a relationship with Beverly Hospital that it would be valuable for students to be familiar with electronic medical records, so Endicott bought a subscription and offered training in medical records platform Epic.

Lucy Kratman, who graduated high school in Rhode Island with interests in journalism and advertising, said she was drawn to Endicott by the opportunity to build a strong resume. She has participated in five internships: doing social media for a law firm, working at an art gallery, marketing for a cleaning company, being a brand ambassador for the New England Revolution, and, currently, interning at a Boston public relations firm, Denterlein, which represents Endicott College. She graduates in December, and Kratman

said the internships helped her narrow her career goals. "Internships help you figure out that perfect fit and give you so many opportunities to try and fail and succeed," Kratman said. "I feel like if not for Endicott, I'd just be figuring things out now."

There is certainly a value to teaching the classical liberal arts, including Western philosophy and literature, American history, and civics. Students need to learn core skills like how to think critically and debate respectfully. Simultaneously, the challenge facing schools is to show how classical knowledge applies to modern times and prepare students to enter the workplace. Not every effort to do this will succeed, and it's too early to judge the effectiveness of Brandeis's initiative. But well-intentioned initiatives to ensure liberal arts curricula remain relevant are worth trying.

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