



Making a Career-Oriented Case for the Liberal Arts at Beloit College

BY CYNTHIA MWENJA, PhD

Eric Boynton, president of Beloit College, regularly attracts appellations such as “dynamic” and “visionary” because of the innovative campus and community endeavors he has initiated. As provost, he collaborated with Beloit faculty and staff on a number of new projects, such as the articulation of campus-wide integrated learning outcomes and the formation of Impact Beloit, a student career hub which facilitates community partnerships.

Since stepping into the role of president in June of this year, Boynton has worked with campus stakeholders to extend career guidance and mentoring for students by establishing two new schools within the college: the School of Health Sciences and the School of Business, Economics, and Entrepreneurship.

From Career Channels to New Schools

The schools are a natural next step from foundations Beloit had laid under Boynton’s leadership as provost. One of those foundations was the development of career channels—guides to help students explore potential careers, showing how their interests can relate to a variety of both majors and future professions. For example, the “Curating and Communicating” channel highlights a variety of potential careers, from archivist to marketing, and calls attention to campus resources related to those careers, such as the Logan Museum of Anthropology. The career channel page also discusses the experiences students should expect in their coursework and promises to connect students to specific off-campus resources. Each of the eight career channels is built out in this way on Beloit’s website

so that students can easily sift through the material and weigh their career options within the liberal arts setting.

Another foundation underlying the two schools’ establishment is the sense of campus-wide community and collaboration Boynton has cultivated as both provost and now president. As Donna Oliver—current provost and dean of the college—says Boynton’s “tremendous energy and optimism are infectious,” making the faculty and staff “want to work with and for him”—and with each other. For example, during the first summer Boynton was provost, he formed a task force of faculty and staff members who accomplished several big charges: setting a strategic vision for Beloit, re-visioning the first-year program, and developing the career channels. Oliver affirms that everyone got on board because of Boynton’s “positive and energetic character.”

Career channels may seem counter-intuitive to proponents of the liberal arts model. Indeed, Rachel A. Bergstrom—director of the School of Health Sciences and associate professor and department chair of Biology—says that many

liberal arts institutions have traditionally resisted tying careers to the liberal arts in the clear ways that Boynton promotes. She points to the way Boynton has extended the previous conception of the liberal arts—“Along the way, he has encouraged the Beloit community to embrace the concept that providing a liberal-arts education and helping students prepare for future careers are not mutually exclusive.”

Ron Watson—associate provost and associate professor of Health and Society and Political Science—has been a co-director of the career-channels program. He appreciates the fact that this approach helps everyone on campus to be “up front, with no daylight between the liberal arts and career readiness,” Watson says. “(This) helps everyone on campus see the deep connection between the liberal arts and a meaningful career.” He points out that alumni have always articulated this connection through their personal anecdotes. He adds that with the challenges now facing institutions of higher institution, it’s more important than ever to meet students’ need for career guidance as part of their education. “We have to draw a much clearer picture of our value.”

The national conversation about higher education questions whether earning a degree, particularly at a private college or university, is worth the investment of time and money. Watson says the answer is “an emphatic yes” for graduates, in terms of both lifetime earnings and living fulfilling lives.

In thinking about the headwinds facing small liberal-arts colleges, as president of Beloit, Boynton realized that he needed even more effective means than career channels to quickly capture the attention of his many audiences: students, their parents, and potential collaborators of all sorts. He wanted the message to be true to Beloit’s roots, and he knew he had to reach audiences who might be hesitant to trust information from a private institution of higher education.

Boynton sought out to express the true value of a liberal-arts education in a way that was “clear, concise, and compelling,” and he realized that developing schools which clearly connect to career trajectories was an

effective strategy to reach this goal; each school can talk about outcomes and futures for students within its programs. Boynton says that the idea of schools within the College had been “kicking around for months,” and he saw the great potential for these to “relate to the strategic elements” already existing on campus—pulling established programs, including the career-channels model, under each school’s umbrella.

Boynton notes that schools provide quick ways of accessing information about various career paths, and they naturally enact the “richness of liberal arts exposure to multiple lines of thinking.” Interdisciplinarity is built into each school, so the students are “essentially trained for leadership,” he points out. “This education is so valuable, and we have to make the case.”

Calling the first two schools the “test kitchen,” Boynton plans for the campus to add others. These initiatives are exciting for alumni and other donors, he says, and any additional

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A large white and black motorcoach is shown from a front-three-quarter view. The coach has a black roof and a white body with black accents. It is parked on a paved surface. The background is a bright, clear sky with some clouds. In the top left corner, there is a logo with the letters 'UL' inside a shield shape, followed by the text 'ULTRA COACHLINER'. In the bottom left corner, there is text: 'UNPARALLELED COMFORT + STYLE' and 'THE ULTRA COACHLINER® DXL is the industry leader. This motorcoach has the smooth ride, capacity and luggage space of a high-end traditional coach bus, at only half the cost to own and operate.' In the bottom right corner, there is a circular seal that says 'PASSENGER AND LUGGAGE BEST IN CLASS CAPACITY'. At the bottom of the advertisement, there is a blue banner with white text: 'BUILD YOUR OWN AT COACHLINER.COM OR CALL (800) 475-1439'. The website 'pupnmag.com' is in the bottom left corner of the page, and 'DECEMBER 2023 9' is in the bottom right corner of the page.

School of Health Sciences

The School of Health Sciences was one of the first two schools formed at Beloit because it “builds on what we’ve done for years,” Bergstrom says. Beloit consistently sends students to top programs in health sciences, such as nursing, veterinary, physical therapy, and schools for M.D.s and D.O.s. The keys to that level of student success, she notes, are the structures that lend themselves to being organized as a school. For example, Health and Healing was one of the first career channels established, and Beloit has a Health Professions Advisory Committee which mentors students in a variety of ways. One area of mentorship is a seminar series which prepares students for the medical school application cycle. The committee also brings alums who have expertise in health fields to campus to speak to and make connections with the students. Additionally, Beloit has an agreement with the Medical College of Wisconsin whereby students pursue an accelerated path to a Doctor of Pharmacy

degree, graduating with an undergraduate degree from Beloit and a PharmD from MCW in as few as six years. All of these elements will enhance the School of Health Sciences.

Bergstrom affirms that Beloit is looking at other partnerships as well. They are working with a local health system to make partnerships in which students trained as certified nurse aids can gain employment. Beloit has also collaborated with local Black Hawk Community College so that students can become certified as Emergency Medical Technicians. Bergstrom says that working with Boynton on these partnerships has been fulfilling—they prepare students with meaningful certifications which will augment their careers, while “keeping it all in the context of the liberal arts.”

While health professions have been “more straightforward” in how they clearly lead to careers as doctors or nurses, for example,

Bergstrom says that working with Boynton’s vision has been enjoyable. Faculty members have begun to think much more expansively about the many other roles people can play in health careers. Students might pair a health and society degree with a business minor to position themselves for employment in healthcare administration. Such broader thinking about careers within the schools helps students translate their personal purpose to tangible careers—“opening possibilities while keeping core liberal arts values,” Bergstrom says.

In true interdisciplinary spirit, the School of Health Sciences includes tracks for Spanish language and culture as well as Anthropology. For students preparing to work in public health, Anthropology and Spanish are “crucial,” Boynton says. He observes that the language classes will prepare students to share knowledge and work in communities that are becoming more and more bilingual. In addition, Anthropology has been a *continued...*

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longstanding strength at Beloit, notes Boynton, with many graduates pursuing doctoral degrees after graduation. The campus boasts the Logan Museum, an accredited natural history museum; its holdings support courses such as Forensics and Human Anatomy as well as *The Human Animal*, both taught by anthropologists. In fact, Dean Robert Golden of the UW-Madison School of Medicine and Public Health has taken notice of how well Beloit is preparing students under this new plan and has already expressed interest in developing a partnership.

School of Business, Economics, and Entrepreneurship

Diep Phan—professor of Economics and Business; director of the School of Business, Economics, and Entrepreneurship; and chair of the Data Science and Data Analytics Program—says that this school was straightforward to develop because the field of business is already “very interdisciplinary and dynamic.” Additionally, she argues, when business is “infused with the liberal arts, it is best for the labor market.” She points out that students should know more than just business principles; they must “draw from a wide array of viewpoints.”

Since Beloit organized the School of Business, Economics, and Entrepreneurship, people across campus have been thinking of ways to connect their content to the school. Phan remarks that with this model, “no department, no program needs to be bigger”; expansion for the school emerges from a team effort across campus.

Phan says that the school is the “natural evolution of career channels” which “pulled resources from across campus.” Having this basis, she states, “made it very easy to reach out and ask for people to contribute.” Within a month of announcing the plan for the new school, they had created a list of 10 humanities courses to be offered in the School of Business, Economics, and Entrepreneurship. She says that classes such as “Money Narratives”—an English course—can help students who often focus more on numbers to consider the humanistic values that those numbers represent. Likewise, in “The Art of War for Business Majors”—a history course—students consider historical models of governance. This slate of humanities courses within the school, Phan says, establishes a “distinctive business curriculum” that will offer students crucial perspectives to draw on in their careers.

Outside of class offerings, several existing programs undergird Beloit’s new School of Business, Economics, and Entrepreneurship. One is the Center for Entrepreneurship in Liberal Education at Beloit, or CELEB. This unique entrepreneurship hub, now in its 20th year, “has a start-up incubator, student-run art gallery, Beloit’s film and media production lab, student-led foundation, music recording studio, and a maker lab for hands-on creativity and collaboration,” according to Beloit’s website.

Other programs that support the School of Business, Economics, and Entrepreneurship, Boynton says, are ones like the Upton Scholar residency, in which a world-class economist is selected to lead a weeklong, on-campus economics forum and offer a keynote address. Also, alums who have been successful in business and entrepreneurship can serve the campus as professors of practice in the Beloit Executives-in-Residence Program. In addition to teaching courses and advising students, these executives-in-residence serve as consultants and coaches to Beloit’s president. In another exciting development for Beloit, the college recently established a new role, that of vice president for Career and Professional Development. Tim Leslie, the first person to serve in this role, will bring his experience from over two decades at Amazon.

Power of Collaboration

Beloit clearly offers an impressive array of innovative programs to enhance students’ experiences, and Boynton promotes a compelling vision for the ways that those programs can be integrated within the school model to connect the liberal arts to a wide variety of careers. Most importantly, he inspires dynamic collaborations among campus stakeholders.

Boynton “does a good job of trusting the people he’s working with to be creative,” Bergstrom says, “and he’s good at recognizing that he’s working with a team who are also excellent at their jobs.”



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