

Workforce needs employees with liberal arts background

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To prepare profit and loss statements, an accountant needs a specific set of data and analytical skills.

To be truly successful, an accountant also needs high-level transferable skills such as communications, evidence-based reasoning, problem solving, global understanding and a sense of social responsibility so they can contribute with integrity to their workplaces and to their communities.

This is where St. Cloud State University and other institutions of higher education play a prominent role. However, there are some who see the call for higher education to address workforce needs as contradictory to the fundamental purpose of a university education — the creation of prepared minds and thought leaders. In fact, the truth is the opposite: We are preparing students for success in employment, life and citizenship through a broad education in addition to specific skills training.

Today's employers seek highly-skilled workers with broad knowledge that applies to real-world settings — a workforce training need that is best met through broad-based liberal arts education. The [Association of American Colleges and Universities](#) (AAC&U) has identified this through its Liberal Education and America's Promise initiative. Since 2005, LEAP has challenged the traditional practice of providing liberal education to some students and narrow training to others in higher ed. I am proud to serve on the LEAP President's Trust with presidents from all sectors of higher education including liberal arts colleges, community colleges, comprehensive state universities and research universities.

Today's employers demand more college-educated workers and more engaged and informed citizens. Minnesota's business and workforce needs are no exception. At St. Cloud State, we support liberal arts education because that is what the workforce, and our state, needs.

Minnesota was recently ranked as America's Top State for Business for 2015 in a study by [CNBC](#) scoring 1,584 out of a possible 2,500 points. Workforce is a key value in the methodology worth 400 points, more than any of the 10 categories which also include cost of doing business, economy, education, infrastructure and others. Workforce was given greater weight because companies are increasingly seeking locations with the largest supply of skilled qualified workers.

Minnesota finished a respectable 13th for workforce based on the education level of our employees, the numbers of available employees and Minnesota's demonstrated abilities to retain college-educated workers. We gained our highest marks for education at No. 2 based on traditional measures of K-12 education as well as life-long learning opportunities including

higher education. The state performed the poorest in cost of doing business, an attribute previously seen as the most important selling point for states to attract businesses.

“Today, people are the ultimate resource,” according to the [International Economic Development Council](#). “Business location decisions are increasingly based on the presence of a talented workforce.” States have picked up on this and are increasingly touting their workforces to attract businesses. But what are businesses really looking for in workforce candidates?

In the January 2015 national study, “[Falling Short? College Learning and Career Success](#),” AAC&U discovered that nearly all employers surveyed (91 percent) agree that “a demonstrated capacity to think critically, communicate clearly and solve complex problems is more important than his or her undergraduate major.” Ninety-six percent agree that “all college students should have experiences that teach them how to solve problems with people whose views are different from their own.” In line with four previous national surveys since 2006, employers endorse broad learning and cross-cutting skills as the best preparation for long-term career success.

Broad liberal education is becoming increasingly important for colleges and institutions in preparing students for today’s and tomorrow’s workforce and leadership. Our state’s economy and business health depends on it. Employers are seeking candidates who can do more than complete tasks; they’re looking for employees who are prepared for long-term success and growth. St. Cloud State and the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities system understands this and is up to the task of preparing our students for 21st century workforce needs.

This is the opinion Earl H. Potter III, president of St. Cloud State University. To A Higher Degree is published the fourth Sunday of the month and rotates among the presidents of the four largest Central Minnesota higher education institutions.