



SHU Faculty Publications

---

1-19-2013

## Assessing the Future of Higher Education

John J. Petillo  
*Sacred Heart University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.sacredheart.edu/faculty>



Part of the [Higher Education Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Petillo, John J., "Assessing the Future of Higher Education" (2013). *SHU Faculty Publications*. 34.  
<https://digitalcommons.sacredheart.edu/faculty/34>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@SHU. It has been accepted for inclusion in SHU Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@SHU. For more information, please contact [santoro-dillond@sacredheart.edu](mailto:santoro-dillond@sacredheart.edu).

THE BLOG

# Assessing the Future of Higher Education

November 19, 2012, Updated January 19, 2013

John Petillo, President of Sacred Heart University

From legislatures to academia, from newsrooms to boardrooms, from human resources departments to recruiting firms, all across America, there is a vigorous debate about the future of higher education, often in the least likely places.

Are students getting the necessary skills to compete in the global workforce? Is the cost of higher education excessive? Are students being saddled with debt at the worst possible time? Can students with a liberal arts education compete in an economy that demands technical skills? And most pointedly: What are students getting for their money?

Unemployment has become a crisis for the Millennial Generation. For recent high school graduates, the rate is a staggering 26.7 percent, and for new college graduates, it is 9.4 percent, according to a report from the Economic Policy Institute.

In addition, graduates with degrees in the arts and humanities have an especially high rate of unemployment, according to a [study](#) by Georgetown University.

Such daunting statistics typically lead students, and their perplexed parents, to wonder, "What does a college degree get me?"

The American view of higher education has become mercenary as a result of economic unrest, and there are increasing calls for programs that provide

skills training to ensure a livelihood. However, we shouldn't be so easy to dismiss the importance of a liberal arts education and the intellectual "skills" it provides, which are adaptable across all professions, from law to business, journalism and health care.

In research conducted after the so-called "Great Recession," the Association of American Colleges and Universities asked 302 employers what they expected of college-educated students. The response was "employers want their employees to use a broader set of skills and have higher levels of learning and knowledge than in the past to meet the increasingly complex demands they will face in the workplace."

However, only 25 percent of the employers thought two-year and four-year colleges were doing a good job getting students prepared for the economic challenges ahead.

The employers recognized the most effective education combines "a broad range of skills and knowledge and in-depth skills and knowledge in a specific field or major." This, quite simply, means blending liberal arts with applied learning.

That formula has proven effective for us. On a local level, in Fairfield County, Conn., which is home to some of the nation's Fortune 500 companies and many family-run businesses, the Business Council says that CEOs are looking for students who have technical expertise, critical thinking, teamwork and communications skills and the ability to work with diverse colleagues.

They place a high premium on young people who are self-disciplined, reliable, curious, respectful of age and gender differences and have social and etiquette skills. That sounds like a lot, but many of those qualities are the products of a liberal arts education.

Beyond a doubt, colleges are passing through an evolutionary period and must figure out how to provide students with the competencies provided by the traditional liberal arts, such as critical reasoning, quantitative abilities, team work, public speaking and writing. These are the skills that will benefit a lifetime of careers, not just the first job out of college. However, the new American colleges and universities must also do a good job, or perhaps better job, of providing curriculum that will give students the knowledge base to enter a profession immediately upon graduation.

The intentional integration of these two goals is the work of universities such as Sacred Heart. We take pride in offering all our students at least two majors -- one in the liberal learning that will make their abilities inflation proof (those skills in learning how to learn) and one that will make them great candidates for good jobs right after graduation.

We have also learned that our university must be intimately engaged in primary and secondary education so that future students come to us with the necessary skills that will help them thrive in an academic environment.

Over the past year, Sacred Heart, along with other colleges, has made a serious effort to advance this agenda through participation in Horizons National, which brings low-income students from the public and Catholic school systems to our campus for six weeks over the summer. We hope this experience of a college campus will inspire them to set high personal goals for themselves.

In addition, we have a partnership with Bridgeport, Connecticut's Central High School through a new Early College/Dual Enrollment program that allows high school students to take classes that will make them college-ready. We are also active in the federal Upward Bound program, which provides academic support in math, science, composition and literature for high school students -- many of whom are from low-income families and the first generation to attend college.

Central to our mission has been the goal of providing a college education to students who might not otherwise have the opportunity. We believe that besides being a key economic indicator in later life, a liberal arts education teaches students to think critically and develop the skills and values that will help them to not only succeed in the workplace but also make the world a better place.

And while it may be difficult to quantify these goals, I regularly see proof that this mission is a worthwhile one. I recently talked to an older alumna who came back to Sacred Heart and told me the best part of her liberal arts education was that it taught her how to love life.

Is there any nobler goal than that?