

# What's in a Name? College-Bound Students Weigh in on the “Liberal Arts”

## Key Findings

1. What does the term “liberal arts” mean to students?
2. What are the perceived benefits of a liberal arts education?
3. Does “liberal arts” help or hurt an institution’s appeal?

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Over the past several years we've witnessed an increasing tendency to question the value of a "liberal arts" education, as well as a confusion in the market about what is meant by "the liberal arts." This has created a conundrum for many of Art & Science Group's clients — double down on the liberal arts as a distinction that can help differentiate them in a positive way from university competitors or add new programs and experiences that speak more directly to the practical interests of students and parents. And, of course, it's not just liberal arts colleges that have a stake in how the liberal arts is perceived. Art & Science Group has worked with a number of universities for which a core liberal arts experience is a point of pride as well as a perceived point of distinction.

While there has been much speculation recently about the perceived value of the liberal arts, very little national research has been focused on this topic. Given the high stakes around the liberal arts, we thought it was time to explore in a focused way what prospective students think "the liberal arts" means, what value they associate with it, and the extent to which this descriptor adds value to or detracts from an institution's appeal.

The results provide an interesting perspective on the challenges institutions face when they attempt to use their commitment to the liberal arts as the basis for a distinctive value proposition.

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## 1. What does the term “liberal arts” mean to students?

### Findings

- A relatively high proportion of respondents (65% or greater) associate the liberal arts with many characteristics educators would agree are central to a liberal arts education: Class discussion, intellectual, lots of student-professor interaction, critical thinking, life-long learning.
- The prospective students we surveyed do not actively associate the liberal arts with several attributes unrelated or contrary to the liberal arts (e.g., politically conservative, party animals, focus on one subject, etc.).
- Fewer than half of the respondents associate liberal arts with “small college.”

### Commentary

Perhaps understandably, prospective students don't have a sharply defined idea of what a liberal arts experience might entail. That said, it appears that the nature of respondents' associations with the liberal arts comports roughly with the view of liberal arts held by many educators. Chart 1 represents the extent to which particular characteristics related to the college experience are thought to describe the liberal arts or are thought to *not* describe the liberal arts. We have circled clusters of characteristics based on the frequency of their association/non-association with the liberal arts.

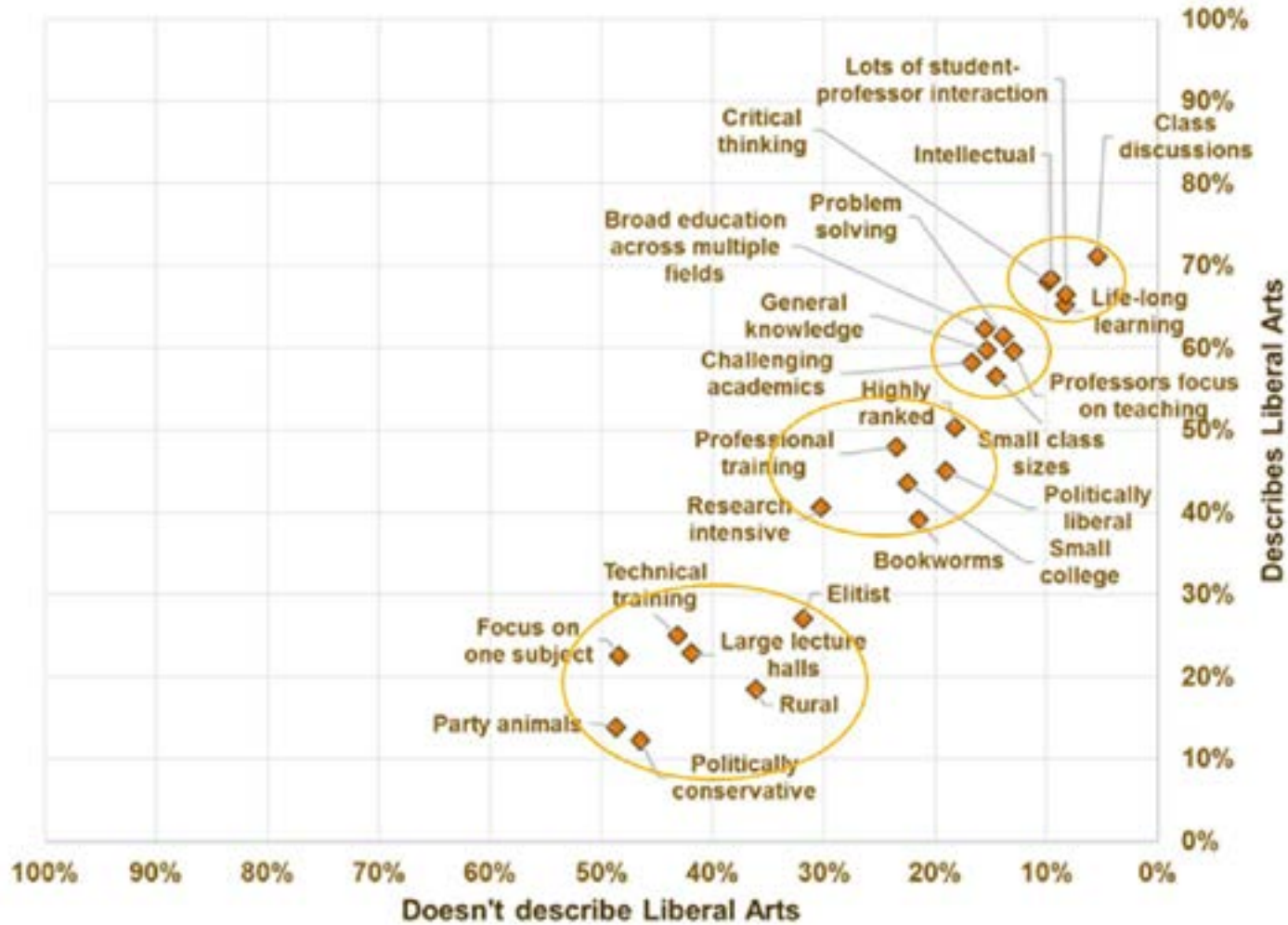
As Chart 1 shows, the characteristics most closely associated with the liberal arts can be found in the first two clusters (by around 65%-70% and around 55%-65% of respondents, respectively). These include class discussions, intellectual, critical thinking, lots of student-professor interaction, and life-long learning; and problem solving, broad education across multiple fields, general knowledge, professors focus on teaching, challenging academics, and small class size. Characteristics in the first cluster suggest that the aspects of the college experience respondents most frequently associate with the liberal arts emphasize its interactive nature and imply intellectual engagement.

Conversely, respondents we surveyed do *not* actively identify the liberal arts with attributes educators would either see as unrelated or contrary to a liberal arts education (e.g., party animals, focus on one subject, politically conservative, technical training, large lecture halls).

Interestingly, “professional training” (in the third cluster) is associated with the liberal arts by nearly half of respondents, which suggests that the recent focus on career preparation we have seen at many liberal arts colleges and the promotion around this theme may be having an impact on the market.

Finally, we were particularly struck by the fact that fewer than half of the respondents associate liberal arts with “small college.” This suggests that many prospective students do not see a small college setting as essential to a liberal arts education.

**Chart 1: Characteristics associated with the liberal arts**



## 2. What are the perceived benefits of a liberal arts education?

### Findings

- Over half of the respondents believe that there are particular benefits to a liberal arts education, such as making them well-rounded (65%), helping them get a good job (52%), and preparing them for graduate school (51%)
- However, fewer than half (38%) think it is the best kind of education for them
- More than half (54%) believe that liberal arts education is available at almost every college or university
- A relatively high percentage of respondents (between 21% and 29%) did not feel they know enough to have an opinion about the statements tested

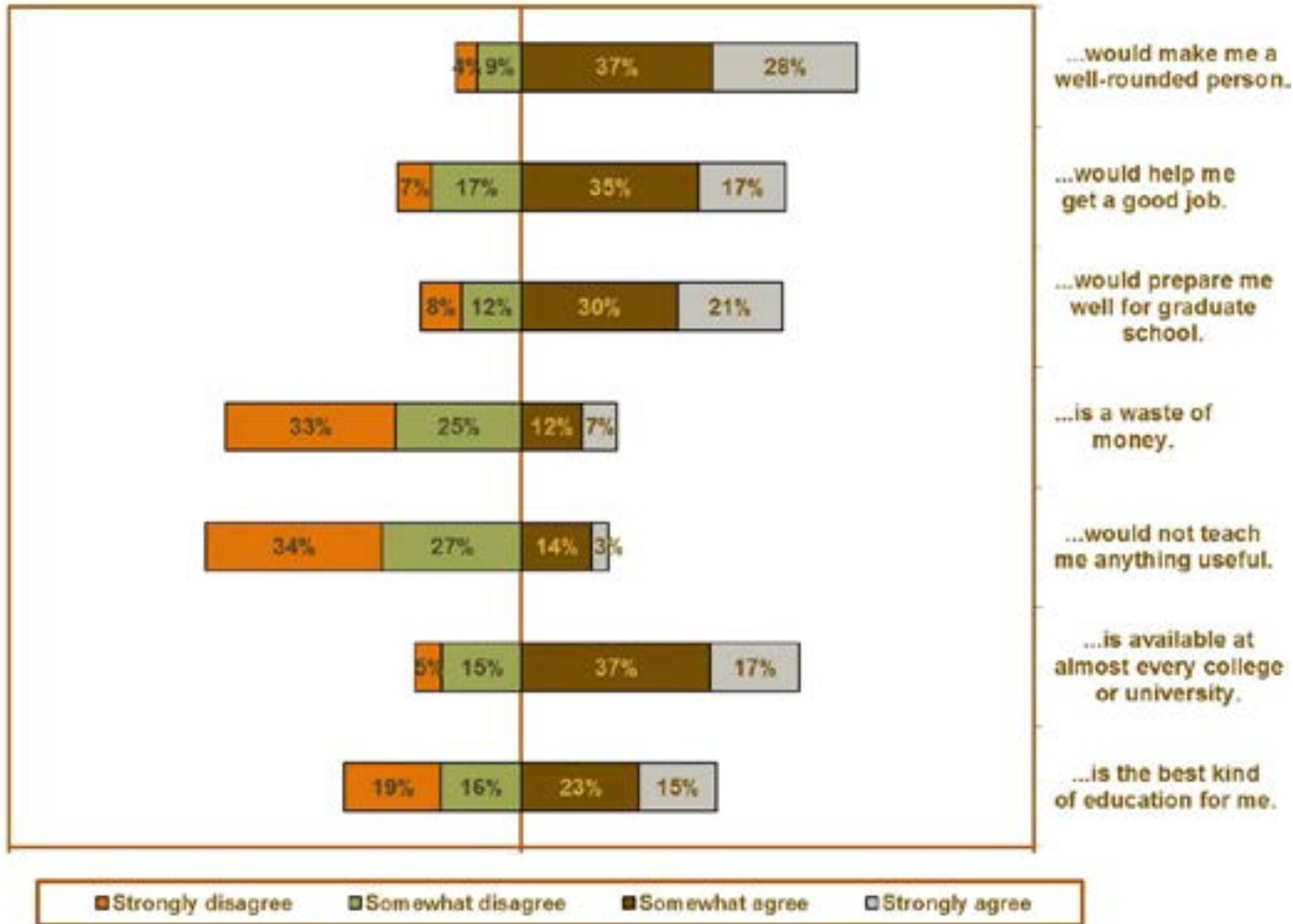
### Commentary

Recent headlines notwithstanding, most respondents recognize the merits of a liberal arts education, which is associated by a majority of respondents not only with becoming more “well-rounded” but also with very practical outcomes — getting into graduate school and getting a good job. Only a small fraction believe that a liberal arts education is not valuable.

While this is fairly good news for liberal arts colleges, that fewer than half of respondents (38%) believe a liberal arts education is the best kind of education for them suggests substantial limits to its appeal. Furthermore, findings provide strong evidence that students don’t necessarily think that they must go to a liberal arts college to receive the benefits they associate with the liberal arts: Over half believe that they can have a liberal arts experience *at almost any college or university*. Even a high percentage of students whose first choice of college is a liberal arts institution (40%)\* share this belief.

So, while the liberal arts as a particular kind of educational experience appears still to have some traction in the market, it is clear that liberal arts colleges cannot assume that the liberal arts has broad appeal or that the liberal arts college is perceived to be uniquely positioned to deliver such an experience.

Chart 2: Agreement with liberal arts statements



### 3. Does “liberal arts” help or hurt an institution’s appeal?

*In addition to wanting to understand how prospective students conceive of the liberal arts and the value they associate with it, we also sought to understand the impact an explicit association with the liberal arts might have on an institution’s appeal. To explore this question, we developed brief, but detailed, descriptions of areas of focus that could be seen as defining of the experience a student might expect at a college or university, in other words, that described what a hypothetical school might be best known for: intellectual development, global focus, post-college planning, and leadership. Respondents were asked to rate on a 10-point scale the appeal of each of these focus areas. Each was described in two ways, identical except for the insertion of the term “liberal arts.” Half of the respondents saw one version with “liberal arts,” half without the term “liberal arts” included.*

rating gaps were lowest included those intending to major in a liberal arts discipline (defined here as social sciences, humanities, arts, natural science, or math).

#### Findings

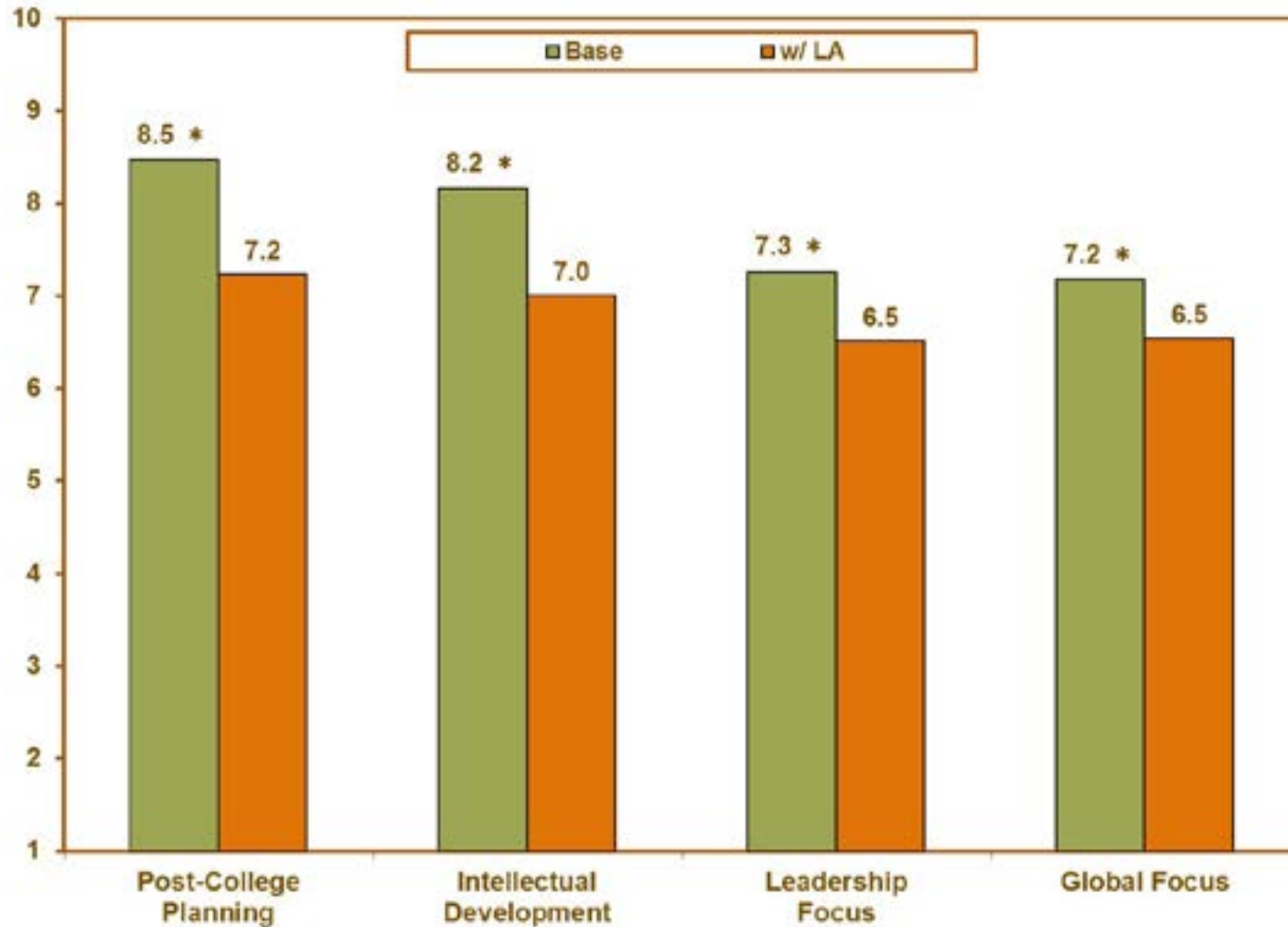
- In each case, the mean rating of the description that included the term “liberal arts” was significantly lower than the one without this language (by around a point).
- The extent of the lag between ratings of liberal arts descriptions vs. those of the base description varied across subgroups. The most sizable lags were among lower ACT scorers, those who wish to attend a school categorized by Carnegie as “professions-focused,” those intending to major in a discipline that falls outside the liberal arts, and under-represented minority students.
- For no segment of the population did association with the liberal arts enhance the appeal of any of the four descriptions. Unsurprisingly, groups for whom the mean

#### Commentary

The four base descriptions we tested were inspired by some key ways we have seen liberal arts colleges attempt to differentiate themselves from one another and from university competitors. By testing each of these in base and liberal arts versions we hoped to understand the extent to which these expressions of institutional identity — which we know to have been successful at several institutions — were affected by being associated explicitly with the liberal arts. Findings show that while these areas of focus in themselves are fairly appealing, when they are described as part of a “liberal arts” experience their appeal is significantly dampened. This is true overall and for a wide number of subgroups. Furthermore, the term does not have a positive impact on those students planning on majoring in a liberal arts discipline and therefore most likely to be sympathetic to a liberal arts experience.

Whatever the value imparted to students by the actual liberal arts experience, liberal arts colleges should not expect to be able to enhance their appeal to prospective students by touting the value of the liberal arts either as a category or as the context for an experience distinctive to the college.

**Chart 3: Appeal ratings for hypothetical positioning statements**



Note: The descriptions rated were hypothetical and not attributed to particular institutions; the ratings therefore do not suggest how these models might appeal or not for an individual institution.



## Conclusion

Findings strongly suggest that the idea of “the liberal arts,” while not sharply defined, is generally understood by a substantial proportion of the market. However, although the idea of the liberal arts has positive associations, it doesn’t appear that the “liberal arts” itself, as a category, enhances the appeal of the college experience for prospective students. This means that, for liberal arts colleges and for universities that strongly embrace the liberal arts, the “liberal arts” *per se* is not an effective basis for differentiation.

Liberal arts colleges and other institutions committed to the liberal arts should stop trying to convince prospective students of the value of the liberal arts in itself or as a context for experiences with a more “practical” focus. Instead, to develop a more differentiated market position, each of these institutions should frame the experience they provide in a way that moves beyond the category of liberal arts and is focused more directly on the elements of the educational experience that is distinctive to it.

## Endnotes

\* Liberal arts institutions are classified by membership in The Council of Independent Colleges and/or The Annapolis Group of Liberal Arts Colleges.

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## Study Methodology

The findings in this issue of *studentPOLL* were based on research fielded during March and April 2017. The sample includes voluntary high school senior ACT test-takers. Respondents were each recruited from a random sample of 40,000, plus an over-sample of 2,500 African-Americans. Including the oversample, 42,500 emails were sent inviting participants to the online survey along with two reminder emails.

Responses were collected from March 8, 2017 to April 21, 2017. A total of 1,031 people responded to the survey invitation and 418 qualified and completed the survey. Responses are weighted by race, region and gender so that respondents resembled the full population from which they were recruited. The margin of sampling error for this population of students is plus or minus 3.1 percent and is higher among subgroups.

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## About *student*POLL

A collaboration between ACT and Art & Science Group, LLC, *student*POLL presents the results from a series of national surveys that measure the opinions, perceptions and behaviors of college-bound high school students and their parents. Published for the benefit of college and university senior leaders and enrollment officers, as well as secondary school college counselors, *student*POLL seeks to provide insights and understanding that will result in better communication and service to college-bound students across the nation.

First published in 1995 by Art & Science Group, a leading national source of market intelligence for higher education, *student*POLL has become a trusted and widely cited source of reliable data and insights on many critical questions concerning college choice. ACT and Art & Science Group have now joined forces to expand the depth and range of the issues that will be explored in *student*POLL. *Student*POLL findings and analysis are provided free on the [Art & Science Group website](#).

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## About ACT

ACT is a mission-driven, nonprofit organization dedicated to helping people achieve education and workplace success. Headquartered in Iowa City, Iowa, ACT is trusted as a national leader in college and career readiness, providing high-quality assessments grounded in nearly 60 years of research. ACT offers a uniquely integrated set of solutions designed to provide personalized insights that help individuals succeed from elementary school through career. To learn more about ACT, go to [www.act.org](http://www.act.org).

## About Art & Science Group

Art & Science Group offers market-informed strategy to higher education, independent schools and the non-profit sector. Since our founding in 1994, we have provided our clients with strategic market research and recommendations, built on a foundation of both creative thinking and empirical rigor — art and science. We work in a variety of arenas, leveraging a foundation of market data, analysis and inventive ideas, to guide and advance our institution's strategic interests and critical investments. Our firm is dedicated to helping each institution position itself in ways that positively affect the decisions of its key constituents — whether to apply, matriculate, give and so on — in an institution's favor. We provide a customized and collaborative approach for each client, with recommendations rooted in sophisticated research and thorough analysis. Our experienced consultants and researchers produce the highest quality findings and recommendations on the market.

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