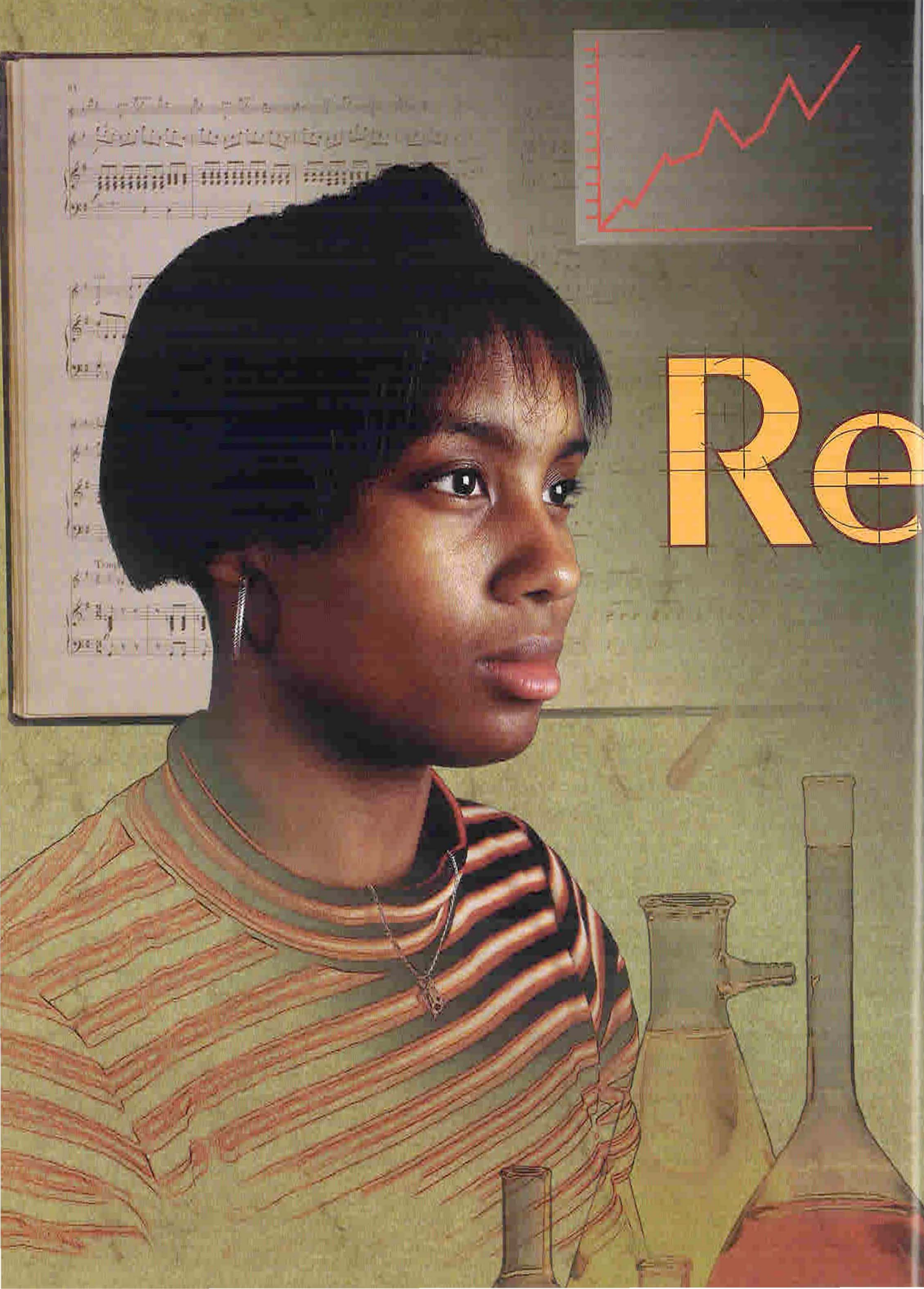
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As the call for specialized education grows louder, an advocate of the liberal arts considers what we might lose in the bargain.

thinking the Liberal Arts

By Jared Brown

A NAIVE AND RATHER IMMATURE 17-YEAR-OLD IS about to graduate from high school. As he ponders his future, he rejects the option of attending college, believing that a college education will in no way benefit his firm intention to become a professional actor. However, while performing in a play in Los Angeles he makes friends with another aspiring performer, three years his senior, who recommends trying a single year of college, as he had done, as a brief way-station between adolescence and adulthood. Without giving the matter much thought, the young man submits an application to the same institution his friend had attended: Ithaca College, a small liberal-arts school in upstate New York.

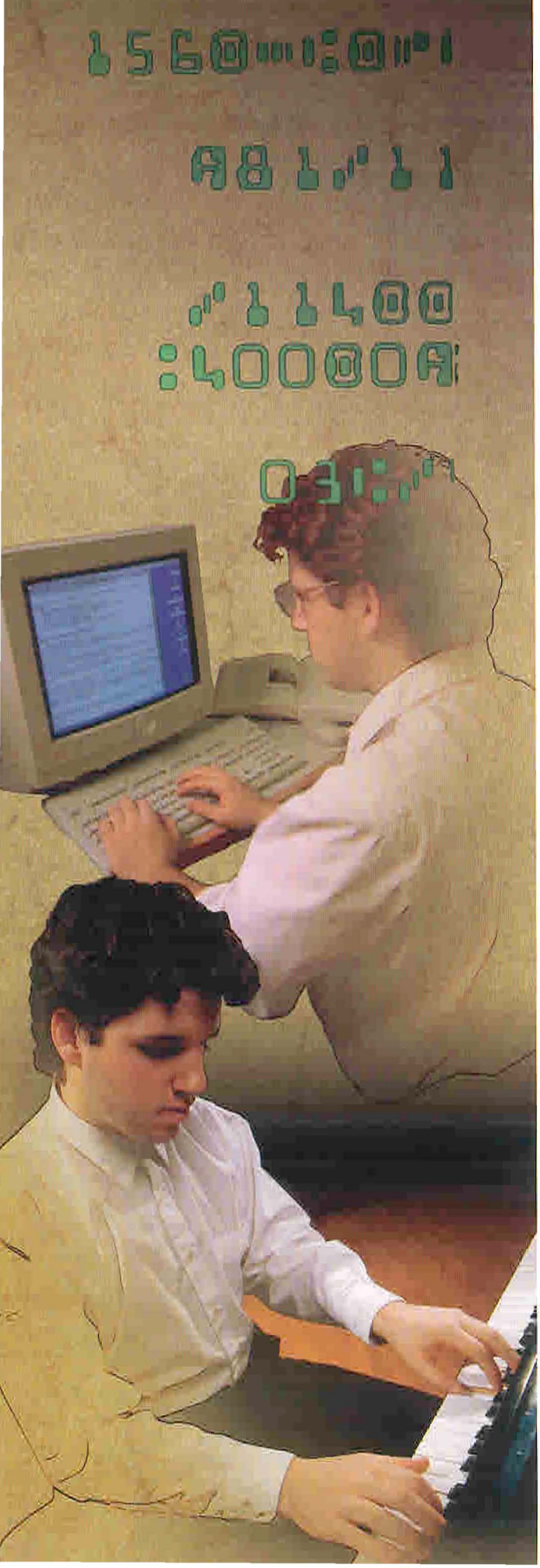
His grades reflect the scant amount of work he devotes to his classes—which, in turn, reflects his certainty that he will remain at college only for a single year. Indeed, he drops out at the end of the spring semester to begin what he thinks will be his life's work.

In time, however, he is struck with a realization: that acting in (and seeking to be cast in) television shows that he has come to perceive as trivial and shoddy gives him little satisfaction. In the two years he spends pursuing this career, his interest gradually diminishes, while the idea of returning to the upstate New York college he so casually left becomes more and more attractive to him. That college, probably somewhat reluctant to readmit a student who performed with so little distinction in his first year, nevertheless permits him to return.

Thus begins a chain of events that sees the young man, now pursuing his studies with seriousness and commitment, fall quite passionately in love with the academic life. Later he will receive two graduate degrees and begin teaching at a mid-sized state university. Still later, he accepts a faculty position at Illinois Wesleyan, a small university that in many respects resembles the liberal-arts institution he attended years before.

As the reader may have already guessed, this tale of the student-turned-actor-turned-student-turned-professor is the story of my own career. I look back upon my smug notion that higher education and the liberal arts had no relevance for me because they would not advance my training as an actor with a mixture of shame and amusement. It has long been clear to me that any career choice I might have made would have been immeasurably enriched by the wide-ranging undergraduate education I received.

My personal discovery of the lasting importance of a liberal-arts program occurred when, as a sophomore, I enrolled in a yearlong sequence of courses in the English department focusing on all of Shakespeare's works. My enrollment in the courses, classified as general-education offerings, reflected my desire to stay as close as possible to subjects related to the study of theatre, while still fulfilling the college's liberal-arts requirement. Not yet ready to embrace the philosophy of a wide-ranging education wholeheartedly, I tested the waters, but gingerly and with only one foot.



The courses were taught by Dr. John Harcourt, a professor who, so far as I'm aware, had little knowledge of theatrical production. I initially thought that Dr. Harcourt's apparent disregard for theatrical considerations would make the class a less than fulfilling experience for one who believed as I did: that all playwrights should be evaluated only in light of the productions to which their plays would lead. But Dr. Harcourt's approach steadfastly remained focused on Shakespeare as a thinker and as a poet.

To my surprise, I gradually came to regard the Shakespeare sequence as more intriguing, more meaningful to me than my acting, directing, and technical theatre classes. Now, many years later, I still vividly recall my excitement as the year progressed.

Shakespeare's works, of course, offer an infinite world of fascinating material, and I was fortunate enough to have a gifted teacher who was able to explicate the plays and poems profoundly and excitingly. His insights forced me to think analytically and creatively; to reflect on the writer's intentions, methods and achievements. Looking back, I can say without exaggeration that this class transformed my life, opening my eyes and imagination to ideas and images that filled me with wonder.

During my first semester in the Shakespeare sequence, I submitted a paper proposing a particular interpretation of *Julius Caesar.* I was thrilled when Dr. Harcourt told me that, so far as he knew, the interpretation was a new one, and that I should consider publishing the paper (after additional research and considerable revision) as an article in a scholarly journal. Most overwhelming, though, was that I was being treated as a person whose ideas were worthy of esteem by a professor whom I deeply respected.

During my remaining undergraduate years, I continued to feel the power of new ideas in the courses I took in philosophy, history, psychology, and other disciplines. The result was that a young man who had focused his attention narrowly on a particular career path became a strong adherent of the liberal arts.

TEACHING THEATRE AT ILLINOIS WESLEYAN, I FIND THAT the School of Theatre Arts must continually walk the dangerous high wire between professional training and a liberal-arts education.

There is no doubt that theatre students need training in specialized technique, whether they are actors, directors, designers, or playwrights. Actors need to master vocal and physical technique, directors need to learn how to employ the principles of blocking and rhythm, etc. But it is also true that these students will never achieve artistry in any theatrical field without a wider knowledge of the world.

During my lifetime, I have witnessed a change in the way most theatre students have been educated. For many years the primary training ground for the professional theatre was the conservatory, in which students focused almost exclusively upon technique. Now, more and more theatre professionals are emerging from university theatre programs—a great many of them from liberal-arts institutions. Why? I believe it's because theatre students at liberal-arts colleges are taking courses in disciplines such as English, psychology, and history along with their theatre courses. And that's immensely ben-

eficial for them, for an actor—or a playwright, or a director, or a designer—needs to comprehend those things he or she will learn in such classes: how to analyze a play, how to understand what drives and motivates the characters, how the historical context in which the play is set affects the characters' behaviors.

Let us suppose that an actor is cast to play Medea---or, for that matter, any other challenging role. The actor must look deeply within herself in order to discover what motivates and drives the character. But looking within will not be particularly helpful unless the actor knows what to look for, knows how to look, and has a reasonable store of knowledge and experience to look *at.* In other words, the more the actor knows, the more deeply she has experienced, the richer her inner life, the more intriguing her characterization is likely to be. If she knows nothing about psychology, for example, her ability to understand Medea's responses to the play's events and the stresses her character undergoes—and how those stresses affect her behavior—will inevitably be limited.

True, the achievement of artistry also involves a mastery of technique. But if a broad base of knowledge is not present, actors, designers, directors and playwrights can never become more than technicians—proficient at a particular skill, perhaps, but unable to translate that proficiency into art. In my opinion, students of theatre are best served by liberal-arts undergraduate training: training that encourages and nurtures the growth of artists, instilling in its students an appreciation for great theatre and encouraging them to aspire to the highest level of artistry they can attain.

To this point I've been speaking about the value of a liberal-arts education to a student who is primarily interested in theatre. But the point applies to all students. If a theatre major can benefit from studying biology, for example, so can a biology major profit by studying theatre.

In the process of writing this piece, I asked Thomas Griffiths, professor of biology at Illinois Wesleyan, whether he knew of any cases in which students of biology had been enriched by studying theatre. "I know that many students have told me how much they benefited from having taken Acting for Non-majors," he responded. "It gave them greater confidence in speaking publicly; it gave them a greater appreciation for the various arts of the theatre; it enabled them to enjoy theatrical productions in a different, more profound way."

Tom also mentioned how much he had enjoyed the presence of theatre majors in his Human Evolution class. "They enriched the class greatly: both in their willingness to contribute to class discussions, and in the uninhibited way in which they participated in some 'scenes' they devised, acting out demonstrations of such things as gorilla behavior and chimpanzee behavior."

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Now let's remove theatre from the equation altogether. Bill Kirtz, an associate professor at Northeastern University, recently published an article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* contending that journalists are better served by a wide-ranging than a narrowly focused education. Kirtz attempts to refute the notion that a liberal-arts education and training in journalism are incompatible.

"The best journalists," he writes, "are the best-educated journalists."

Journalists "need the type of knowledge that is at the core of the liberal-arts tradition...courses that explore history, culture, politics, and science. Liberally educated journalists are essential to society at large," Kirtz concludes, "and liberal-arts faculties should enthusiastically embrace the opportunity to educate them."

Kirtz's point would be echoed by many who teach in fields that are generally thought of as "specialized." But we live in a time when the liberal-arts approach finds itself under attack by those favoring a more "practical" approach to undergraduate education. Therefore, it's worth considering the ways in which this style of teaching and learning remains vital, unique, and worth preserving.

Speaking for myself, the benefits of a liberal-arts education have been tangible. None of the books I have written focus narrowly upon the theatre. *Zero Mostel: A Biography* deals as much with mid-20th-century American politics (especially as it involved the blacklisting of artists and others that arose as a consequence of the "witch hunts" begun by Senator Joseph McCarthy and carried on by the House Committee on Un-American Activities) as it does with Mostel's achievements in the theatre and in film. *The Theatre in America During the Revolution* draws on military tactics, economics, anatomy, philosophy, and other disciplines seemingly unrelated to the theatre—but necessary in the attempt to describe how the British and the Americans used the theatre as a different (but, they hoped, highly effective) form of warfare in the years before and during the American Revolution. It's true that the plays and productions of the time contributed little or nothing to the theatre as an aesthetic medium, but they are extremely useful to study as successful tools of propaganda. If I've satisfactorily described the ways in which these plays functioned, it is perhaps because my liberal-arts background permitted me to approach the analysis from many perspectives.

IT IS MY FIRM BELIEF IN THE VALUE OF THE LIBERAL-ARTS tradition that accounts for my decision to teach at Illinois Wesleyan. I am comfortable in this environment because I share the university's values. In my classes I try to impart to my students the excitement I felt (and continue to feel) when

I am exposed to heretofore unexplored ideas.

I have been given a challenging and appropriate platform from which to do that, for my primary teaching responsibilities are in the area of theatre history, and my courses often wander far afield—in appropriate ways, I hope—from matters pertaining strictly to the theatre. Theatrical tradition has been influenced by advances in science and technology, by cultural change, by social conditions, by the attitudes of various peoples toward aesthetic stimuli, and I try to convey to my students the notion that changes in the theatre are mirrored by developments in other aspects of life. Fortunately for me, Illinois Wesleyan not only permits me to use such a wide-ranging technique in my classes, it actively encourages it. Everyone at the university—the President, the Provost, my faculty colleagues—expresses support for teaching each subject in a way that demonstrates its connections to other, seemingly unrelated fields.

That the liberal-arts approach should be under attack in an increasingly career-oriented society will come as a surprise to no one. Indeed, many colleges have found it prudent to shift their emphasis to vocational training during the past 10 years or so, even while continuing to describe themselves as liberal-arts institutions.

I am pleased to say that Illinois Wesleyan has not taken that path. The university's new general-education program, calling for all students to become more liberally educated than in the past, is only one sign of Illinois Wesleyan's commitment to the liberal arts. Of course, "professional schools" (Art, Music, Nursing, and Theatre Arts) are important components of the university, but students in *all* disciplines are required to enroll in a considerable number of general-education courses; and three of the four professional schools offer liberal-arts degrees as well as specialized degrees.

As a faculty advisor, I have observed that most students (with some very significant exceptions) initially regard general-education courses as irritants. ("You mean I have to take a *lab science* course?") They often regard such courses as distractions from offerings that will prepare them for their careers, as the price they have to pay for the education they are receiving in their majors. Afterwards, though, they are often able to look back on their general-education courses with appreciation and with the realization that the courses have transformed the way in which they think about the world and their place in it. Ultimately, they can usually see how knowledge gained in general-education courses can be applied in a meaningful way to their specialized fields.

Ironically, as more than one observer has noted, while prospective college students and their parents are often more concerned about career preparation than about any other aspect of college life, many graduate schools, law schools, medical schools, and employers are seeking college graduates who are broadly educated—students who have learned how to think analytically, how to solve problems creatively, and how to communicate effectively.

Indeed, graduates from institutions such as Illinois Wesleyan frequently find themselves in greater demand than students who have prepared narrowly for a particular career—as Richard H. Hersh, president of Hobart and William Smith Colleges, discovered when a polling firm conducted a survey of public attitudes toward liberal-arts education. Quoted in the *Chronicle of Higher Education,* Hersh said that while "parents and students believe that the main purpose of a college education is to teach skills that will lead to a job, corporate chief executive officers and personnel directors [feel] strongly about the importance of a liberal-arts education."

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Unlike Americans only a generation ago, most Americans today are likely to shift careers several times during their lives. While each shift will undoubtedly require some specialized training, the individual who has been most broadly educated will be best able to adapt to the challenge of a new career. Illinois Wesleyan University accepts its role, not merely to prepare engineers, nurses, actors, chemists, musicians, and the like, but to prepare human beings whose habit of mind will assist them to meet any challenges fate should throw their way.

As I reflect on my own life, shaped by the liberal-arts tradition, I often ponder what might have happened if that naive 17-year-old of long ago had been denied the experiences such an education offers, and the many doors it opened along the way. And I am concerned that pressures from anxious parents and opportunistic legislators to turn undergraduate education into a vocational-training program may one day become irresistible.

Those of us who believe in the transformative power of a wide-ranging undergraduate education know that the liberal-arts tradition must be persuasively defended. Perhaps the best way to confirm the value of that tradition would be to pause for a moment and reflect on what our lives would be like had that tradition not existed when we were undergraduates. Our answers should provide the best case that the liberal-arts doctrine is something our society needs to both preserve and cherish.

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