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Reflections on a liberal arts education: part III

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Quad 136

Reflections on a Liberal Arts Education: Part III

What Google Learned

Among the tech companies, Google is probably the most famous for its rigorous hiring process. As Cathy Davidson, the author of *The New Education: How to Revolutionize the University to Prepare Students for a World in Flux*, writes:

> *Sergey Brin and Larry Page, both brilliant computer scientists, founded their company on the conviction that only technologists can understand technology. Google originally set its hiring algorithms to sort for computer science students with top grades from elite science universities.*

Obviously this algorithm would fill Google with STEM graduates at the entry level and presumably those employees would eventually become the successful mid level and top management in the organization.

True to its DNA, Google decided to use data to analyze how well its hiring algorithm was at producing successful employees. Davidson writes:

> *In 2013, Google decided to test its hiring hypothesis by crunching every bit and byte of hiring, firing, and promotion data accumulated since the company's incorporation in 1998. Project Oxygen shocked everyone by concluding that,*

> *among the eight most important qualities of Google's top employees, STEM expertise comes in dead last. The seven top characteristics of success at Google are all soft skills: being a good coach; communicating and listening well; possessing insights into others (including others with different values and points of view); having empathy toward and being supportive of one's colleagues; being a good critical thinker and problem solver; and being able to make connections across complex ideas.*

This list is very much like the skills and experiences that are touted by residential liberal arts colleges: critical thinking, communication, living and learning in a diverse community, and synthesizing ideas. I'd also note that some of the Benedictine values we emphasize at Saint John's University and the College of Saint Benedict map nicely onto this list: respect for individuals, hospitality and the importance of community.

Google did further research in 2017, employing anthropologists and ethnographers, and found further support for the importance of soft skills:

> *Project Aristotle analyzes data on inventive and productive teams. Google takes pride in its A-teams, assembled with top scientists, each with the most specialized knowledge and able to throw down one cutting-edge idea after another. Its data analysis revealed, however, that the company's most important and productive new ideas come from B-teams comprised of employees who don't always have to be the smartest people in the room.*
>
> *Project Aristotle shows that the best teams at Google exhibit a range of soft skills: equality, generosity, curiosity toward the ideas of your teammates, empathy, and emotional intelligence. And topping the list: emotional safety. No bullying. To succeed, each and every team member must feel confident speaking up and making mistakes. They must know they are being heard.*

As a result of its research Google has broadened its hiring model with the goal of including humanities
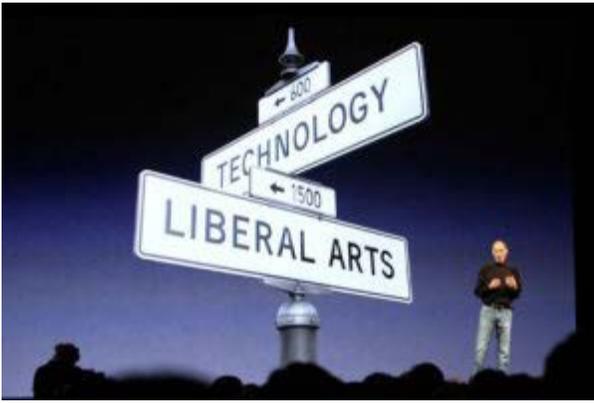
majors, artists, and even MBAs, candidates that the STEM-heavy organization had previously viewed with skepticism, at best.

None of this is particularly surprising for fans of the liberal arts. The philosophy behind a broad based curriculum emphasizing exploration of the humanities, arts, natural sciences and social sciences is that such an education both makes students more successful in their major field of study and better prepares them for the diverse and changing world they will live in.

What Google's research suggests is that even technology and science companies that embrace the liberal arts find themselves more successful and better at understanding the needs of their customers and the changing marketplace.

This worldview is shared by another highly successful tech company that is a neighbor of Google's in Silicon Valley. Steve Jobs famously said of his company, "It's in Apple's DNA that technology alone is not enough — it's technology married with liberal arts, married with the humanities, that yields us the results that make our heart sing."

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