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No Dilemma At All

Ask a group of first year students why they are attending university and someone is sure to pipe up with: "I want to get a good job." Is there a dilemma between this purpose and the traditional values of liberal education?

I believe not. But there has been much debate over whether education should focus on developing students' abilities to consider ageless problems of beauty and truth or whether it should focus on teaching the knowledge and skills required to work productively. The Greeks themselves were divided over this issue; should liberal education teach the skills of the thinker or the skills of the pragmatic orator?

In my view, these are not mutually exclusive aims. A liberal education can do both. Indeed, I think a liberal education is the best approach for teaching the skills that will enable students to succeed in the world of work and to contribute to the communities where they live.

The University of Lethbridge has maintained a tradition of liberal education since its inception in 1967. It is organized primarily as a breadth requirement so that students take courses in sciences, social sciences, humanities, and fine arts, no matter what their specialization or major. In order to examine the value of the undergraduate liberal education experience, my colleague Dr. Jennifer Mather (Psychology) and I developed an on-line questionnaire which was emailed to alumni of the U. of L. We asked respondents to rate the importance of their liberal education experience for developing particular skills and attitudes relating to employability success as defined by the Conference Board of Canada.

Alumni generally viewed their liberal education experience favourably (Fig. 1). Overall, 70% of respondents rated the value of their liberal education experience on the important side of a 7 point Likert scale. 19% rated the value as very important. Only 16% of respondents selected the lower categories of importance.

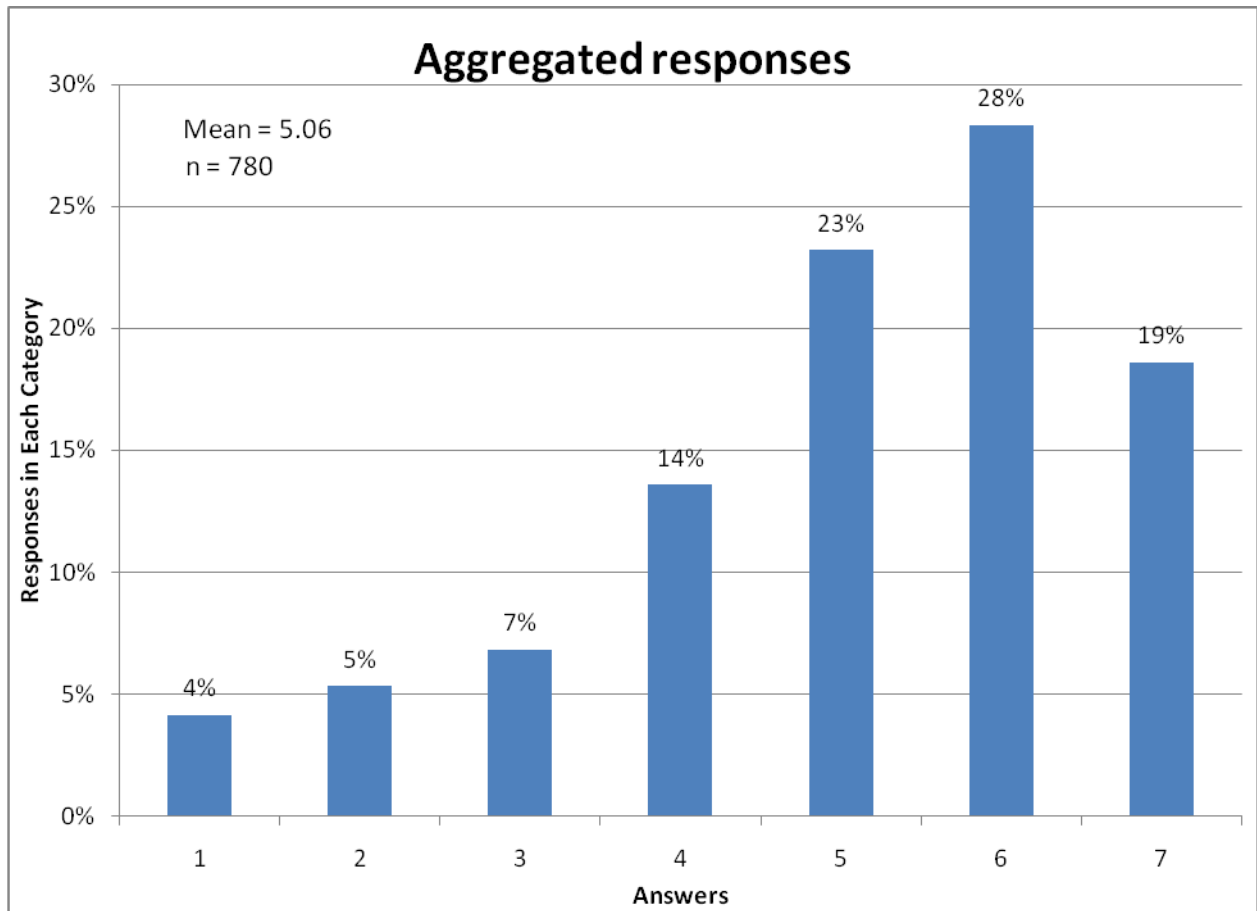


Figure 1

The aggregate responses were collected from twenty-four separate questions which asked alumni to rate the importance of liberal education for developing skills in three categories: individual cognitive / intellectual skills, self-reflection skills, and individual management skills.

Written communication was the skill that was assigned the highest level of importance by the 780 alumni who responded (Fig. 2).

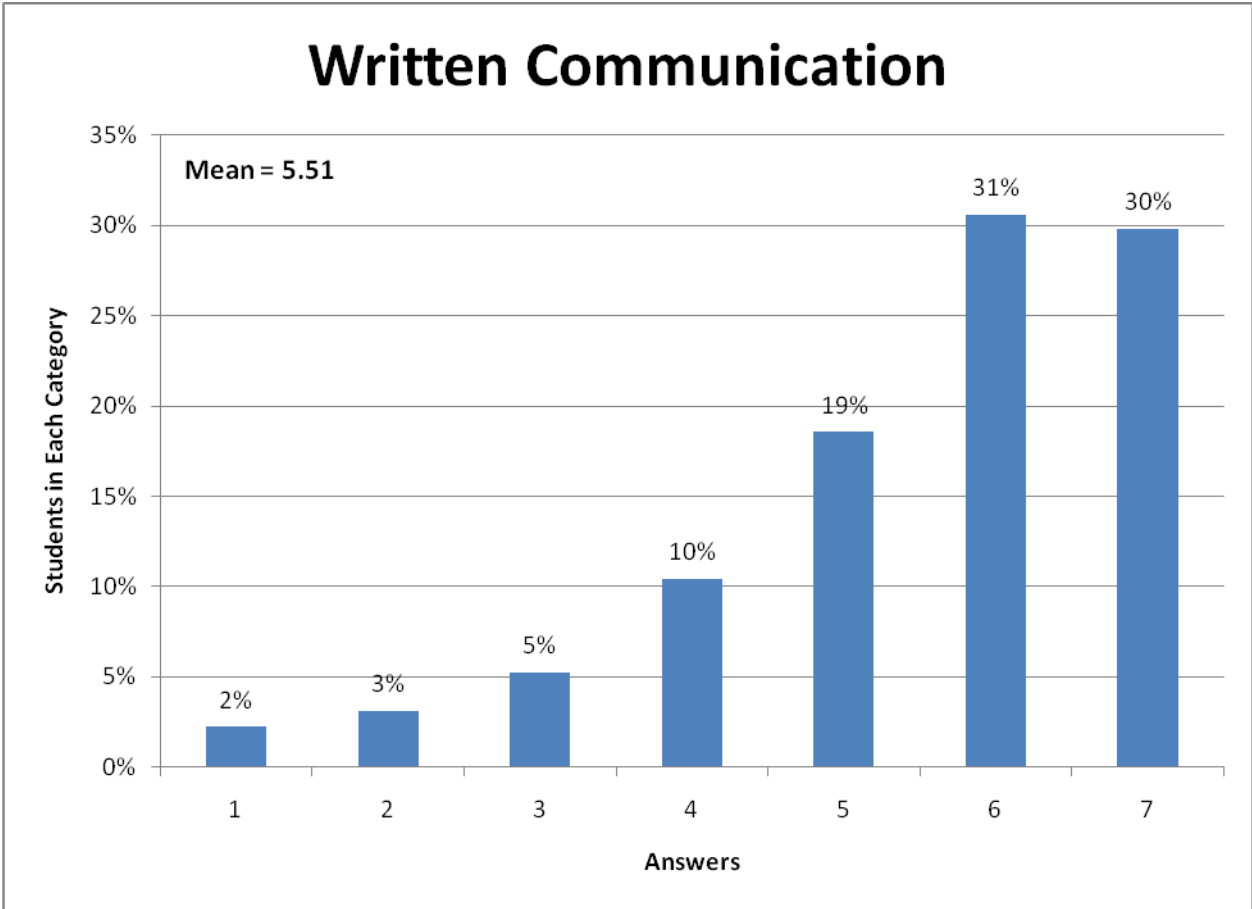


Figure 2

In total, 61% of respondents rated the importance of their liberal education experience for developing their skill in written communication in the top two categories of importance (80% rated it above the mid-point). Only 5% of respondents rated their liberal education experience in the bottom two categories of importance (10% rated it below the mid-point).

At the other end of the spectrum, numeracy was the skill that received the lowest overall rating of importance (Fig. 3).

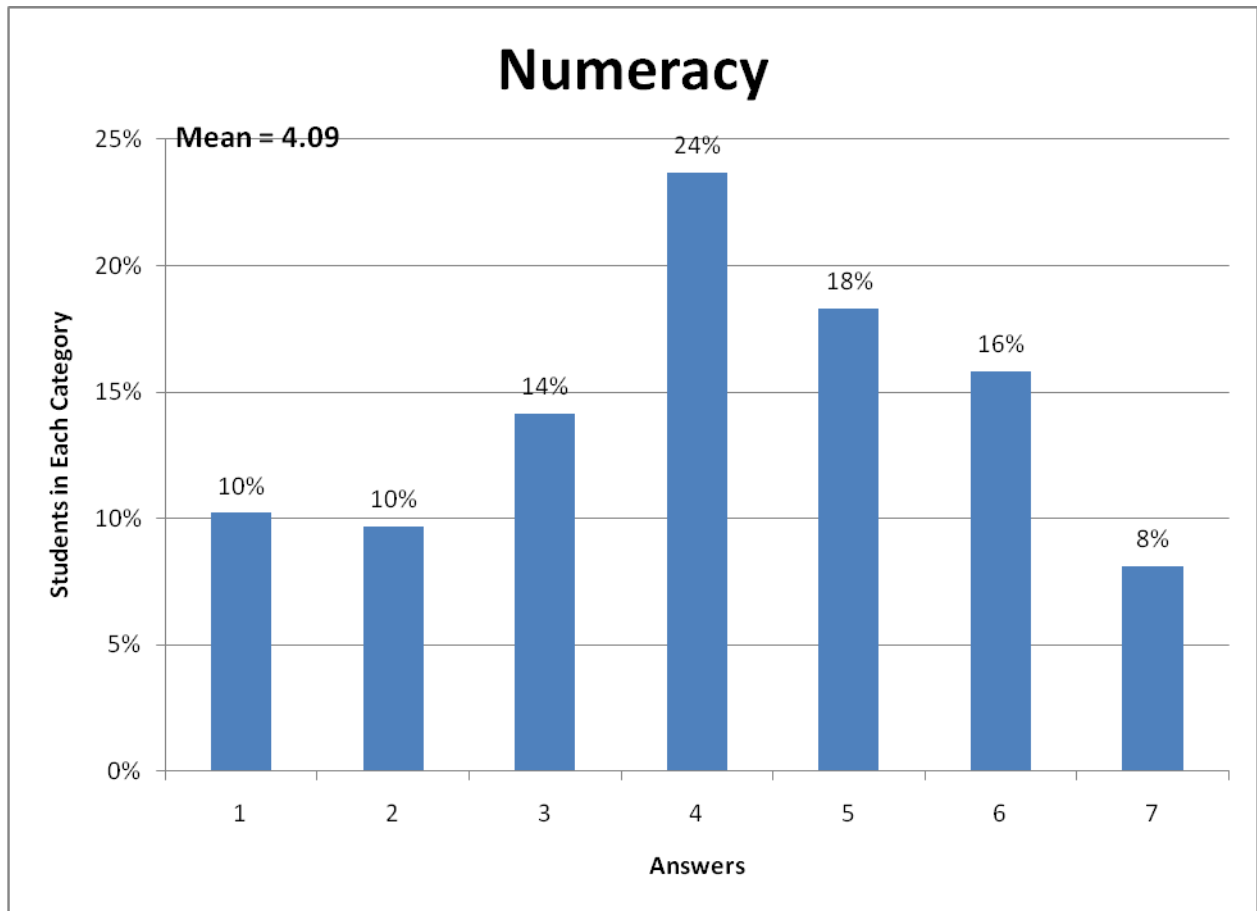


Figure 3

For this question only 24% of respondents selected the upper two categories of importance (42% selected above the mid-point). On the lower side of importance, 20% of respondents selected the lowest two categories (34% selected below the mid-point). It seems in this case, then, that liberal education may not contribute as much as it could to the development of students' numeracy skills.

We also collected data in a comment field. A respondent who graduated with a degree in accounting and who works for an oil company in Calgary wrote:

“... the main difference is general analytic skills. The folks without the liberal education requirement tend to think almost mechanically and don't like to step back and see how things can be done better or easier. Honestly, it is a huge difference and when I was required to do my GLER (General Liberal Education Requirement) at the U of L, I thought it was a waste of time; it isn't. It's quite likely the most important part of my education as a management graduate.”

This statement, others like it, and the data we collected from our survey suggest to me that liberal education is far from impractical. In fact, the skills most valued in the workplace are best

developed through a liberal education. In my view, there is no dilemma between liberal and disciplinary education and when students say they are at university because they want a good job, I tell them they've come to the right place.