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Dear Prospective Hamilton Parent,

If your experience is anything like mine when my daughter was applying to colleges, your child’s college plans are frequent topics of conversation at the dinner table, with relatives and among friends. As nerve-wracking as that dialogue and the overall process can be, it’s also gratifying to think about the growth, maturity and independence that your child will experience at college. I know it may be hard to imagine now but, believe it or not, your family — like many before you — will not only survive this process, but perhaps become closer because of it.

While your child is seeking the best fit for his or her next four years, your thoughts are probably also focused on paying for such an important investment … and let’s be honest, given current economic realities and the sacrifices you’re preparing to make, you want to make sure that the college your child ends up attending is worth it.

It’s a fair question, and one that many families ask. My sense, from talking with many students and their parents who are considering Hamilton, is that they believe strongly in both the short- and long-term value of a quality liberal arts education, but they are also seeking reassurance that the liberal arts remain the best choice for their child in today’s economy. Ironically, I believe that a liberal arts education is more relevant and important now than ever before, because of globalization and the rapidly changing technologies in the world in which we live. Our graduates are our best advocates, and they tell us that a Hamilton education — including our strong emphasis on written and oral communication — serves them well in their first jobs, their future jobs, and throughout their lives.

But don’t just take my word for it. With this letter, I’ve enclosed an op-ed published recently by Forbes.com that speaks to the importance and value of a liberal arts education. The short essay was written by Steve Sadove, a Hamilton graduate, parent, trustee and former CEO of Saks Fifth Avenue. As your family considers your son or daughter’s college options, I hope that Mr. Sadove’s perspective makes for an interesting read as you contemplate the investment you are about to make in your child’s future.

Thank you for your strong interest in Hamilton and please consider us a partner in helping your family navigate the remaining months of this sometimes daunting, but hopefully rewarding, college admission adventure.

Sincerely yours,

Monica C. Inzer
Vice President and Dean of Admission and Financial Aid
Employees Who Stand Out

by Steve Sadove

Originally published by Forbes.com, Sept. 9, 2014

It is foolish to underappreciate the value of liberal arts skills. It is bad for our country, bad for business and bad for those just starting in their careers.

As parents, too often we’re tempted to persuade today’s children to specialize as soon as possible. But as difficult as it may be, we need to take the long view when considering what’s best for their careers. For some students, a specialized college education leading to a specific set of skills may be the right choice, but I believe most will be better served in their professions by a liberal arts education.

A recent Annapolis Group study shows that liberal arts graduates are more likely to say their college was highly effective in helping them get their first job or get into graduate school than alumni from other types of public and private institutions. Liberal arts graduates also credit their undergraduate experience with helping them develop a broad range of important skills.

During my 38 years in the corporate sector, I have found that as employees progress in a career, it is these broad liberal arts skills — the ability to think critically and communicate clearly — that differentiate their performance.

This is not to say that specialized skills are a detriment to one’s career. They sometimes lead to a quicker start in certain functions within an organization. But liberally educated workers differentiate themselves early and tend to outperform their more narrowly trained peers over time. It’s been my experience that they look at issues from various perspectives and find new ways of doing things. In other words, they think critically. And once they have a new idea, they communicate their thinking clearly and persuasively. They understand intuitively that the idea is important, but so is the ability to explain it, whether in writing or in front of a group. While these characteristics can be developed at a large university, they are the hallmarks of liberal arts institutions, where small classes foster interaction and meaningful discourse that require students to develop and defend their views. The ability to think, to conceptualize, to come up with creative ideas separates the top performers.

These are also characteristics desired by employers. According to a 2013 study by the Association of American Colleges and Universities 93 percent of the survey respondents said, “a demonstrated capacity to think critically, communicate clearly, and solve complex problems is more important than [a candidate’s] undergraduate major.”

Throughout my career, I have discovered that the key role of a leader is to foster a culture of teamwork and to set the direction for an organization. Successful managers communicate well, build relationships and create an environment where employees can do their best work. In other words, they practice the skills most closely associated with a liberal arts education, where emphasis is placed on participation, community and functioning as part of a team.

And contrary to persistent stereotypes, liberal arts skills can be lucrative. A 2014 study by the Association of American Colleges and Universities and the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems found that liberal arts majors earn more than most professional majors at their peak earnings ages. It also has been reported that a third of Fortune 500 CEOs have liberal arts degrees, including American Express CEO Ken Chenault (history major at Bowdoin), JPMorgan Chase CEO James Dimon (psychology and economics major at Tufts), CNN and TBS Founder Ted Turner (classics major at Brown), Proctor & Gamble CEO A.G. Lafley (history and French major at Hamilton) and CBS CEO Leslie Moonves (Spanish major at Bucknell).

Liberal arts skills apply to a wide range of issues and different types of organizations. They get you hired, they help you stand out, they create workers with passion and purpose, and they lead to promotions. A specialized education, for me, is secondary. The potential contributions of employees with a liberal arts foundation are without bounds.

Steve Sadove graduated from Hamilton College in 1973. He has served as Chairman and CEO of Saks Fifth Avenue, Senior Vice President of Bristol-Myers Squibb, President of Clairol Inc. and Executive Vice President at General Foods. He chairs the board of trustees at Hamilton.