



An Interview with Leo I. Higdon, Jr., President, Connecticut College



The Value of a Liberal Arts Education

Leo I. Higdon, Jr. with students and young alumni (left); an aerial view of the Connecticut College campus (right)

EDITORS' NOTE Leo Higdon became the 10th president of Connecticut College in July 2006. From October 2001 to June 2006, he was President of the College of Charleston, from which he was also awarded an honorary doctorate. Higdon received a bachelor's degree in history from Georgetown University in 1968. Following graduation, he spent two years in the Peace Corps. He earned an M.B.A. in finance in 1972 from the University of Chicago. In 1973, he joined Salomon Brothers, where he became Vice Chairman and member of the executive committee, and managed the firm's global investment banking division. After 20 years with Salomon Brothers, Higdon became Dean of the Darden Graduate School of Business Administration of the University of Virginia. He left Darden to serve as President of Babson College, which awarded him an honorary doctorate in 2007. Higdon is a member of the Board of Directors of HealthSouth Corp. and Eaton Vance Corp., where he serves as Lead Director.

INSTITUTION BRIEF Founded in 1911 as a liberal arts college, Connecticut College (www.conncoll.edu) is a 750-acre arboretum campus in New London overlooking Long Island Sound. The college offers more than 40 majors, 178 full-time professors, strong interdisciplinary programs including five interdisciplinary academic centers, and is a top producer of Fulbright winners among liberal arts colleges. An NCAA Division III school, it is also a member of the New England Small College Athletic Conference.

What is the value of a liberal arts education today?

A liberal arts education is the best preparation for life and career, and in today's complex and uncertain world, this is truer than ever. Business leaders today are looking for men and women who are adaptable in a changing business environment and who have the intellectual skills and high performance standards that come from attending a residential liberal arts college.

Liberal arts education teaches people to be lifelong learners. This is critical because the people who will be successful in professional life today will face a series of challenges and unscripted problems, and will have to analyze significant amounts of information, get to the heart of the issue, come to a solution set, and maintain a bias towards action.

The experience students gain at an institution like Connecticut College, where they are performing at a high level and interacting with individuals from a broad range of cultures and backgrounds, prepares them to think comprehensively and broadly.

Our graduates tell us – and demonstrate daily – that the preparation they've had here positions them to succeed, irrespective of what industries or roles they may end up in.

Is it tough to remain optimistic for today's graduates with the challenging job market they face and what do you tell students to encourage them?

Business leaders today are looking for exactly the kind of people a liberal arts institution educates and that makes me optimistic about our graduates' futures. But a successful transition to life after college doesn't just happen. We are purposeful throughout our students' four-year education to prepare them to take the next steps.

One example is our unique Career Enhancing Life Skills program that helps students connect academic work and life goals. The program starts freshman year with a series of counseling sessions and workshops in which students work with professionals to identify areas of interest and courses that will allow them to rigorously engage in these topics. We do a college-funded internship or research project in the junior year that gives students the opportunity to test their expectations about a permanent job situation or graduate school area of study. The internships in many cases lead to permanent job offers and the research often helps students determine their life's work. So the process is helpful as a way to complement what the students do in the classroom.

How important is it to reflect diversity within the student body?

Diversity and equity – within the student body and the faculty and staff as well – are critical components of a liberal arts education. The world our students will work and live in demands that they be comfortable with diversity in all its forms. We need to prepare the next generation of leaders to succeed in a very complex global society. Students come to our institution to interact with students unlike themselves – this provides the richest kind of learning environment for all students.

With the debate today over rising tuition costs, what is the focus around financing?

We are committed to providing access to this education. To underscore our commitment, we have increased our financial aid substantially over the past several years to accommodate families who may not otherwise be able to attend. We're a disciplined organization financially, so we have been able to meet the needs of an increasing number of students who require financial aid in these difficult economic times.

In this environment, we always have to justify the value proposition we offer students and their families. We take that seriously, and our alumni demonstrate daily through their own lives and careers the kind of success one can achieve with a Connecticut College education. We provide a number of opportunities for students to connect with our alumni and alumnae and these connections are the foundation of the Connecticut College network, which has tangible value.

This economy is going to continue to provide its set of challenges. We have reduced our tuition increases over the past several years to account for families' tighter financial resources. And we're trying to provide more opportunities for students to pursue whatever path they want to follow – graduate school, fellowships or the workplace. It's a high-touch experience that has a great deal of value and we check that value proposition constantly. Additionally, we are in the final year of a fund-raising campaign that has provided financial support to enhance our campus and our educational programs without negatively impacting our operating budget.

Time and again graduates tell me Connecticut College is providing a substantial value to whatever life path they're choosing after they leave here.

What are the key ingredients that make for an effective leader in your role?

Given the questions people have about leaders in all institutions today, effective leadership requires being worthy of trust and giving people confidence in your leadership, representing the institution and its values well, and being faithful to its mission.

You also have to manage, be strategic and adaptable, and put together a strong team who can work to support a common vision that builds enthusiasm in the institution and moves it forward. ●