How enrolling for a liberal arts programme can help you stay relevant in your job

By Sangeeth Sebastian

Learning about how smart phones work or ways to estimate the household consumption of electricity is the last thing you would expect to study in a literature course. But in Somak Raychaudhury’s class, students get to learn about the everyday utility of physics along with their Shakespeare and Milton.

Raychaudhury is an astrophysicist and Head of the Department of Physics at Presidency University, Kolkata, and is among a growing cohort of professors who aim to make Science education less intimidating to non-Science graduates by linking the subject with their day-to-day lives.

“There is a sense of fear about Science in a Liberal Arts programme. Providing context to Science education helps to fit it in," says Raychaudhury.

His attempt to integrate Science into Literature is based on the realization that to survive in a Y2K worldview, students should be willing to cross boundaries and understand connections between diverse and seemingly separate disciplines. Or in other words, the capacity of an employee in a higher job today depends on their ability to link apparently unrelated elements to create something new. This is something which a programme in Liberal Arts, with its multi-disciplinary approach, can instil in candidates.

**Flexibility**

The topic was the focus of a discussion at three-day seminar on ‘The Future of Liberal Arts’ jointly organised by I.P. Jindal Global University, Sonipat, Ashoka University, Western and Birla Institute, Noida, recently.

According to Rupamajhi Ghosh, Director School of Natural Sciences, Shiv Nadar University (SDU), a liberal studies curriculum gives undergraduate students the flexibility to choose multiple electives for enhanced breadth of learning and engagement.

“This (flexibility) to choose multiple electives is an essential ingredient for the future-readiness of students, as the jobs of the future are not yet known,” says Ghosh. “Since liberal studies graduates are trained to develop skills of creative problem solving, their survival rate in a job is very high. Companies today need not just domain knowledge,” she says.

The ability to think and act beyond a candidate’s core expertise is something which companies are placing a premium on while hiring their prospective employees. As best-selling author Daniel H. Pink writes in his 'A Whole New Mind', for businesses it is no longer enough to create a product that is reasonably priced and adequately functional. In a world of material abundance and information that are readily available on Google, it is the mastery of “soft aptitudes” such as empathy and ability to combine unrelated ideas into a novel invention that are now the main way for individuals and firms to stand out in a crowded market place. The book goes on to note that the coming decades will require people to think and work across boundaries into new zones that are totally different from their areas of expertise.

**Going Beyond**

For medical professionals, this means going beyond their routine computer work to diagnostic questions and offering health and medical information that are readily available on the web. (It is estimated that about 100 million people worldwide go online for health and medical information and visit more than 33,000 medical websites, annually.) The developments are changing the emphasis of medical practices towards empathy, narrative medicine and holistic care.

The trend is also similar in the engineering sector as well. For instance, if you look at the profile of some of the chief executives who run major companies, the CEO, most likely will be a civil engineer from an IIT, but there is very little scope for his specialisation in the job, which he is in, says Raychaudhury. A programme in Liberal Arts, on the other hand, could have served him better,” says Raychaudhury.

**The Myth**

Yet, perception remains that Liberal Arts does not pay well. “This is not true,” he says. “A programme in Liberal Arts actually enhances job prospects, not hurt, as candidates learn skills which they can use in a variety of situations,” he says. “All effective leaders emerge from liberal arts,” he adds.