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COMMENTARY

If Students Are Smart, They'll Major in What They Love

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ISTOCK

It's that time of year again: At many colleges, second-year students must declare their majors. Uncles, grandmothers, and friends will almost certainly ask: "What are you going to do with *that*?" Some parents will say, "I am not going to shell out this amount of money for my kid to major in"

Such responses are based on the premise that choosing a major amounts to choosing a career path, and thus a particular financial future, a degree of security, a lifestyle, an entire identity. The choice seems synonymous with "What do you want to do with your life?" and even "Who do you want to be?" As it is often understood, the decision is loaded in ways that are not useful for the student or for the mission of higher education.

As professors and academic advisers, we must be mindful of how pervasive these misconceptions are. We should take every opportunity to offer guidance to our students as they make these decisions. The premise that choosing a major is choosing a career rests on the faulty notion that "the major" is important for its content, and that the acquisition of that content is what's valuable — meaning valuable to employers.

But information is fairly easy to acquire. And much of the information acquired in 2015 will be obsolete by 2020. What is valuable is not the content of a major, but rather the ability to think with and through that information. That is the aim of a liberal-arts education, no matter the major.

Ask employers. Company representatives who recruit at my college consistently say they don't really care about someone's major. What they want are basic but difficult-to-acquire skills. When they ask students about their majors, it's usually not because they want to assess the applicants' mastery of the content, but rather because they want to know if the students can talk about what they learned. They care about a potential employee's abilities: writing, researching, quantitative, and analytical skills. Some majors teach and hone some of these skills more than others do. Some career

paths will use some more than others. But almost all white-collar jobs will require writing, communication, assessment, numeracy, and above all the creative application of knowledge.

To assume a necessary link between particular courses of study and students' career prospects is to limit their options, and in many cases, their capacity for discovery and intellectual growth. Dartmouth College, for example, has educated two U.S. treasury secretaries, yet neither of them majored in economics or government: Henry Paulson was an English major, and Timothy Geithner majored in Asian and Middle Eastern studies. Plenty of other Dartmouth alumni explode the perceived link between major and careers: Jake Tapper, CNN's chief Washington correspondent, majored in history; Phil Lord and Chris Miller, who wrote and directed *The Lego Movie* and directed *21 Jump Street*, majored in government and art history, respectively.

An alumnus who is a physician told me this year that majoring in history (my discipline) was the best thing he ever did. He explained that much of his job is listening to people's stories and trying to figure out patterns and irregularities, and that doing those things well was what his history major had taught him.

On a larger scale, the premise of the "practical major" is corroding college intellectual life. As students flock to the two or three majors they see as good investments, professors who teach in those majors are overburdened, and the majors themselves become more formulaic and less individualized. A vocational approach to liberal-arts education eviscerates precisely the qualities that are most valuable about it: intellectual curiosity and passion.

"The big majors," a political scientist at Dartmouth told me recently, "collect a lot of students who aren't really interested in the subject, and, because of the class sizes, those students lose out on highly individualized instruction."

The irony, he added, “is that the seemingly practical majors aren’t practical. The government department doesn’t teach you how to get and keep power. The econ department doesn’t teach you how to make and maintain wealth. The computer-science department doesn’t teach you how to code the way Google needs its engineers to code. Each of these are taught as a liberal art.”

And it turns out that the so-called practical major may not even be the best investment. A 2012 [report](#) suggests that, by students’ senior year, those studying in the liberal arts may be better critical thinkers than those majoring in business. It is thinking within and with a discipline, idea, or problem that pushes the mind toward the creativity and confidence that underlie productive and informed action.

Graduates majoring in “practical” majors may well start at higher salaries than their counterparts in, say, comparative literature or art history. But as Derek Bok said in *Our Underachieving Colleges*, we should look at how graduates fare 15 years down the road. Often it is the art historians and anthropology majors, for example, who, having marshaled the abilities of perspective, breadth, creativity, and analysis, have moved a company or project or vision forward. The real investment comes in learning how to think. And the student who has chosen a major based on what she loves has increased the value of that investment.

By releasing students from the pressure of the practical major and allowing them to study what they are sincerely interested in, we allow them to become smarter, more creative, and more able. This is what potential employers value, not course content that is likely to be obsolete once they have finished training the recent graduate.

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