

Your Future



On the Value of a Liberal Arts Education

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Before students may even have decided to apply to college, it still seems important to state that significant employment opportunities as well as opportunities for excellent further education in the professional schools are open to graduates of Harvard College no matter what concentration or course of study they elect. The record on that is clear.

Even in colleges of the liberal arts and sciences such as Harvard, an emphasis on majors believed to land a good job, or to favor being admitted to law, business, or medical schools, is usually justified by an appeal to "utility," to a supposedly clear-sighted appraisal of what the "real" world demands of college graduates. This has become a dominant myth of much American higher education, and some of its strongest advocates are parents. If it is assumed that these "occupational" courses and majors are superior preparation for adult life, and if no one steps forward to challenge that assumption, then they will seem more attractive.

On examination, the benefits of particular majors to long-term job performance or security are hard to discover. Few entry-level jobs in any field necessitate four years of specialized undergraduate study. The same holds true for professional graduate programs: it may seem that medical schools demand biology majors or that law schools want applicants with bachelor's degrees in economics, political science, or pre-law. But the professional schools themselves, especially the good ones, tell a very different story. They want flexible, adaptable minds, minds exposed to a broad range of knowledge and trained in rigorous critical thinking. They want students who can think analytically, look at life as a whole, read with interpretive skill, and write decent, well-constructed sentences.

As James Freedman, Harvard College alumnus, former Dean of the University of Pennsylvania Law School, and former president of Dartmouth, notes, "Within law schools, no less than within undergraduate colleges, the insistent student demand is for specialized, narrow, practical preparation, not breadth of inquiry and general knowledge. Yet the world for which lawyers are being prepared will require, more than ever before, both more specialization and more breadth of knowledge."

A former dean at Harvard Business School, Linda S. Doyle, who is also former president and CEO of Harvard Business School publishing, states, "Certain kinds of knowledge get outdated so fast now, particularly application-focused training for a job. . . . I certainly see that in business education. In the long run, that might get people to understand the value of a general, liberal-arts education."

Medical schools do not prefer particular majors, not even biology, as long as basic premed courses are taken successfully. The Association of American Law Schools recommends courses that stress reading, writing, speaking, critical and logical thinking. Law schools report that by the yardsticks of law review and grades, their top students come from math, classics, and literature, with political

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science, economics, "pre-law," and "legal studies" ranking lower.

In today's fast evolving world, leaders across the spectrum of vocations and professions need a broad imaginative and critical capacity, not a prematurely narrow point of view. In terms of the actual world, a solid liberal arts and sciences education will generally prove the most practical preparation for many demanding, high-level careers, or for the several careers that an increasing number of adults will eventually pursue. No particular concentration or area of study is inherently a better ticket to security, leadership, or personal satisfaction than another. Students should be encouraged to follow their passions and interests, not what they guess (or what others tell them) will lead to a supposedly more marketable set of skills.

Of course, higher education has a utilitarian function. In that regard, as Robert Bellah states, it possesses "its own legitimacy." Yet, it is crucial to combine and integrate that function with other aims and ends, with what Bellah calls "education for the development of character, citizenship, and culture."

A healthy system of higher education offers many rewards: scientific discoveries, eventual and even unforeseen applications, thoughtful political leadership, intelligent public discourse, cultural vitality, and an educated workforce. Higher learning serves several goals in coordination, goals that are mutually reinforcing. The aims are at once personal and social, private and public, economic, ethical, and intellectual. Harvard College exists to serve all these goals and offers a broad array of concentrations and courses for the purpose of educating the whole individual. Why? Because that kind of education, and not one aimed at certain occupational targets, is, in the long run, the best preparation for advanced achievement.