

You Have a Liberal Arts Degree: Now What?

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First, let me congratulate all of you. And, equally important, I think you should all turn around and acknowledge the people who brought you up—assuming they're here—for supporting you throughout your academic careers, for putting up with you, and for, somehow instilling in you a strong work ethic.

And now, you're reaching a milestone. You're just about to complete your bachelor's degree. Time to celebrate. The long haul is over. Some of you are excited to be starting jobs you've lined up, and some are going off to graduate schools. But I expect some of you don't quite know what comes next, which means your celebration could be mixed with apprehension. You've been in this business for the most of your lives: you should be getting a gold watch and settling down in a condominium in Florida. Instead, you're beginning all over again.

As you know, PBK honors not just extremely accomplished students, but, specifically, extremely accomplished liberal arts majors. When you decided on your major, you were probably focused on the immediate challenges. But I suspect that your friends, or your parents, might have wondered about where that major would lead you. Maybe nobody said anything out loud. But I suspect some of them might have winced, or tried to disguise a wince. I'm pretty sure more than one parent thought: "You're going to major in what?" Philosophy? Art history? Let me quote to you a concerned father writing to his son:

I am appalled, even horrified, that you have adopted Classics as a major. As a matter of fact, I almost puked on my way home today. I am a practical man, and for the life of me I cannot possibly understand why you should wish to speak Greek. With whom will you communicate in Greek? I suppose you will feel that you are distinguishing yourself from the herd by becoming a Classical snob. I think you are rapidly becoming a jackass, and the sooner you get out of that filthy atmosphere, the better it will suit me.

Well, when you chose a liberal arts major, you knew this day would come. Now it's here. What on earth are you going to do with that liberal arts degree?

Let me back up and explain something about what's been going on in the higher circles of academe. In 2011, Richard Arum of New York University and Josipa Roksa of the University of Virginia, both sociology professors, published a book: *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses*. Unlike many books that criticize higher education, which are often based on anecdotal evidence, or are making an ideological argument, this one is based on research. Arum and Roksa used a "performance task" section of the College Learning Assessment test. They tested over 2,000 college freshmen in the fall of 2005, and then, tested the same group again in the spring of 2007. In a follow-up study, they tested students after four years of college. The results: 45% of the students "did not demonstrate any significant improvement in learning" in the first two years of college, and in the follow-up study, 36% of the students "did not demonstrate any significant improvement in learning" after *four* years of college. "How much are students actually learning in contemporary higher education?," the authors ask: "The answer for many undergraduates, we have concluded, is not much." For many

undergraduates, “drifting through college without a clear sense of purpose is readily apparent.” I can’t resist, as an aside, this observation by Arum and Roksa: students majoring in liberal arts fields show “significantly higher gains in critical thinking, complex reasoning, and writing skills over time than students in other fields of study.”

The academic community went berserk. The first response was a vigorous counterattack in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. Arum and Roksa omitted important information. The yardstick they used to measure “significant improvement” was chosen arbitrarily. Their tests were unreliable. Their grading was subjective. Readers of the *Chronicle* were satisfied with the rebuttal. Bear in mind who reads the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. People in higher education. You suggest that colleges are doing a bad job, and you can pretty much guess how colleges are going to respond.

The media reaction was a bit different: “A Lack of Rigor Leaves Students Adrift in College” was the headline of NPR’s *Morning Edition* report. *Vanity Fair* called *Academically Adrift* “a crushing exposé of the heretofore secret society known as ‘college.’” And then came the obvious reflection: from the *New York Times*:

The cost of college has sky-rocketed and a four-year degree has become an ever more essential cornerstone to a middle-class standard of living. But what are America’s kids actually learning in college? For an awful lot of students, the answer appears to be not much.

The cost? From 1989 to 2019, the cost of a four-year college education doubled, rising eight times faster than the rise in wages. Student debt was \$400 billion in 2004, a trillion in 2013; now, it’s \$1.5 trillion, the largest US debt after household mortgages. And bear in mind that the higher-education system in the United States is enormous; 69.8% of high-school graduates go to college. In 1950, the total number of students in American colleges was 2.3 million. Now, it’s 19.7 million, slightly more than the population of New York state.

We have this enormous higher education system. It’s incredibly expensive. What if the whole thing doesn’t work? Some critics of our educational system were quick to attack “useless” majors: art history usually ends up high on the hit list, along with philosophy, sometimes English. “I am appalled, even horrified, that you have adopted Classics as a major.” What’s going on here?

Louis Menand, in a *New Yorker* article occasioned by the publication of *Academically Adrift*, offers a possible explanation, on which I am going to expand. He suggests there are two basic conceptions about what our educational system is supposed to do. On the one hand, it serves as a filtering device. In order to get through high school, you have to have a modicum of intelligence, a certain amount of discipline, both of which are reflected in your grades, and then in your ACT or SAT scores. If you’re a goof off and it takes you six years to get through high school, you’ll probably be weeded out. As Menand puts it, “Society needs a mechanism for sorting out its more intelligent members from its less intelligent ones.... College is, essentially, a four-year intelligence test.” While high school provides the basics—that’s where you learn to read, write, add, and subtract—college provides a more specialized training, and it provides a socializing experience. Employers are guaranteed that graduates have a certain level of intelligence, thanks to the filtering process, a certain level of competence in a specific kind of work, and, if you’ve managed to get through college without being obnoxious and without being thrown in jail repeatedly, employers are guaranteed that you can get along with people. College

is utilitarian: it's vocational preparation; there is no incentive to learn anything not directly related to your intended vocation. The goal is to get decent grades, and get the degree, because that certifies you as "eligible" for the next step: the career.

This is one of the things college does. Let's call it "the first mode." But there's another way of looking at the college experience, which is going to sound idealistic. Students are in college to learn. They should be learning what they don't know. For many, college is the place where they discover what they're good at and what they're interested in doing, and not many people know that when they're just eighteen-years old. You're not wasting time when you're exploring options. I entered college as a math/science whiz. Everybody, including me, thought I was going to be an engineer. My scholarship job as a sophomore was grading papers for the required Engineering Mechanics course, which I had aced as a freshman. And then, in the middle of my sophomore year, I took a wrong turn and switched into English.

This other mode of college, the second mode, is where the liberal arts come in. We don't do a perfect job, to be sure, but the idea is to create a balance. Students are expected to learn what constitutes a discipline, be it Anthropology, or Chemistry, or Political Science. If they aren't majoring in science, they should still become familiar with how an empirical science works, so they when they go out into the world they'll be able to make intelligent assessments of whether scientific claims are accurate, or spurious. And if we expect students to become informed citizens, it's probably a good idea if they knew something about history, and about culture, and here, I use the term broadly to include literature, art, music. The first mode of college that I talked about involves training and skills. This one is about education, and the word comes from Latin: ex + ducere, to lead forth. What this mode does is open out possibilities for students. It's not about the degree, it's about what you learn. College is a delivery system for creating, well, college-educated people. And where is it that students learn "critical thinking, complex reasoning, and writing skills," to quote Arum and Roksa? Guess.

Politicians, Democrat and Republican alike, support education. But listen carefully. When they're talking about how important education is, see if they can do so without using words "jobs," "employment," or "economy." Politicians support mode one. Our own legislature falls into that way of thinking. We constantly hear legislators & trustees talking about making UW a tier-one STEM school—do you ever hear anybody talking about making us a tier-one in the humanities? A few years ago, because of the state's ongoing financial problems, UW was hit with a massive \$42 million cut; although one engineering program was cut, the rest of the cuts were in the humanities, the social sciences, and the arts. Meanwhile, look at the newest buildings on campus: the Enzi STEM Undergraduate lab, the Engineering Education Building, the High-Bay Research Facility, the Science Initiative building. I have nothing against engineering or science. My father was an aerospace engineer. I think any improvement of the physical facilities for UW's academic programs is a good thing. My point is that our legislators and trustees assume that engineering and sciences are useful, worthy of major support. But the humanities, arts, social sciences? Not so much.

This is not just a local phenomenon. Let me read you from the Web page of the Obama White House.

Earning a post-secondary degree is no longer just a pathway to opportunity for a talented few; rather, it is a prerequisite for the growing jobs of the new economy. Over this decade, employment in jobs requiring education beyond a high school diploma will grow more rapidly

than employment in jobs that do not; of the 30 fastest growing occupations, more than half require post-secondary education.

Politicians who support education support mode one. They don't argue that we need more religious studies and music history majors.

But let's look at mode two. What do liberal arts majors learn? Here's an item from the *American Bar Association Journal*:

Physics and math majors do the best on the Law School Admissions Test, according to a study by an economics professor. Physics and math majors have an average LSAT score of 160, well above prelaw and criminal justice majors, who have average LSATs of 148.3 and 146 respectively, according to the study by Michael Nieswiadomy of the University of North Texas. Prelaw and criminal justice majors ranked second to last among 29 educational disciplines studied.... Tied for second place, economics majors and philosophy/theology majors with an average LSAT of 157.4.

And from a *Toronto Globe and Mail* article by Thomas Hurka:

A 1985 study for the US Department of Education compared tests of students from different disciplines, with surprising results. Consider the GMAT, used for admission to MBA programs and, ultimately, to the highest levels of management. Undergraduate business students, who you think would be especially well prepared for this test, do badly on it, scoring below average for all test takers. The best results are by math students, followed by philosophy students and engineers.

Those are reports from the outside, as it were. What are employers looking for? Vivek Ranadive is the CEO of Tibco Software. He recently sold the Golden State Warriors so he could by the Sacramento Kings. He was asked what the global economy will need:

The people who succeed in more expensive labor markets like the US will be those who can think creatively and generate the ideas that will propel economic growth. Such skills are best fostered in a traditional liberal-arts environment. If anything, let's make the liberal-arts education more rigorous. I wouldn't want to introduce a trade school element into that. If you teach students one trade, that skill might be obsolete in a few years. But if you teach people how to think and look at lots of information and connect the dots—all skills that a classic liberal education gives you—you will thrive.

Thinking outside the box, being creative, coming up with new ideas. Let's add to that analytical intelligence, which enables you to determine what ideas are good, plus the ability to understand other people's points of view, and to balance one's own interest against others in pursuit of the common good. Where do you develop your analytic intelligence, if not in math, the sciences, and philosophy. Where do you learn about creativity? Perhaps by taking courses in literature, art, music, but in fact, math and science are also creative in their own ways. Where do you learn to read and write? One hopes it's not *just* in English classes. Where does one learn to communicate with other people, to understand their viewpoints, to balance one's own interests against others. I should think philosophy, sociology,

psychology, political science, history might help here. But, oddly enough, so will that most useless of all disciplines, my discipline, English literature.

There's some recent research being done by scholars in my field who have been studying cognitive development and the English novel, scholars such as Liza Zunshine, author of *Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel*, and Blakey Vermeule, author of *Why Do We Care About Literary Characters*. According to these scholars, who are looking at scientific studies about how the human mind has evolved, reading novels basically provides us with practice in reading people and working through social situations. We sympathize with characters—we do this automatically, without thinking—and we try to understand why they're doing what they do, and what we would do in their place. It's just how the mind works. We regard literary characters as real people, and we read novels to learn how to deal with people. Oddly enough, this is something everybody who reads novels seems to know. The only people who don't know this are English professors, who have been trained to talk about the formal qualities of a novel, its structure, and its themes, and maybe how the novel is an expression of the culture of its time. Years ago, when KUWR was running a version of Dickens *A Christmas Carol*, apparently people kept calling in and asking what Tiny Tim's disease was. "Spirit, . . . tell me if Tiny Tim will live." "I see a vacant seat, in the poor chimney corner, and a crutch without an owner, carefully preserved. If these shadows remain unaltered by the Future, the child will die." Somebody at KUWR called me, since I taught the Dickens course. I said, "Listen carefully. Tiny Tim is a fictional character. He doesn't have a disease." That's the English professor answer. I now know that the correct answer is distal renal tubular acidosis. Either that, or rickets. If it's acidosis, sodium bicarbonate, potassium citrate: if it's rickets, vitamin D, fish oil, and he'll be just fine.

What this suggests, in the one field I know pretty well, is that disciplines that can seem abstract, detached from the real world, useless, impractical, can nonetheless have an indirect bearing on how students develop into well-rounded, even successful, adults. This useless liberal arts stuff isn't so useless after all.

Examples. James Baker, Chief of Staff for Ronald Reagan, then Secretary of the Treasury, then Secretary of State under George H. W. Bush. Major: classics. When the second world war began, she tried to join the Women's Army Corps—the WAC—but she was too tall. Instead she started working as a typist. When they discovered she was an English major (from Smith), they moved her up quickly, and before long, she was working for the OSS—the forerunner of the CIA—with the director, General William "Wild Bill" Donovan, coordinating the entire US spy network in Asia, first from Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), then from China. After the war, she got interested in French cooking. Julia Child. How about the man who made millions working for Bain Capital? Mitt Romney. Majored in English. He then went on to do other stuff (we almost had an English major for president). A. G. Lafley, described by David Brooks of the *New York Times* as a brilliant innovator, the man who turned around Procter & Gamble. History at Hamilton College. Then there was the woman whose parents wanted her to get a practical, utilitarian degree, and who disappointed them by majoring in French and classics, classics because she liked the stories in Greek mythology. J. K. Rowling, creator of Harry Potter. Have you ever heard of Dr. Anthony Fauci? Classics.

Let me run through the careers of non-famous people. Christina Turley, who runs the Turley Wine Cellars. Art History. Barbara Sibley, disappointed at standard Mexican restaurant food, founded her own upscale Mexican restaurant in Manhattan, *La Palapa*. Anthropology, which got her interested in

the history of Mexican cooking. Jeffrey Alford, author of six award-winning cookbooks, focusing on eastern dishes, praised for their recipes, praised as great tour books, and even as fine coffee-table books. English. (I don't follow cooking—I know about this because he e-mailed me a few months ago from Thailand, telling me that my class in poetry really helped him become a good writer.) Fred Finkelstein, a doctor and professor at Yale Medical School. Music History. Daniel Arons—actually, he was not only my college classmate, but also my classmate in grade school and kindergarten. Dan's a professor at the Harvard Medical School and a doctor at Massachusetts General Hospital. American Studies. George Hamlin, CEO of Canandaigua National Bank and Trust, winner of over 50 awards for community service in Rochester; he built the New York State Wine & Culinary Center. He has the Distinguished Flying Cross for flying over 100 F-105 fighter missions in Vietnam. Physics. Also has a law degree. One of my college roommates, Mike Skol, spent his career in the foreign service, with postings to Vietnam, the Dominican Republic, Italy, and Costa Rica. He was an assistant secretary of state—apparently there are dozens of them—and a Latin American expert. One of his assignments was to accompany Vice President Dan Quayle. Whenever Quayle put his foot in his mouth, which was fairly often, the follow up, in the press or on the radio, would be “Latin American expert Michael Skol explains, ‘What the Vice President meant was . . . ’” George H. W. Bush appointed Mike ambassador to Venezuela. Religious Studies.

So, what can you do with a liberal arts education? Anything you want. Actually, the people who founded this university were way ahead of the curve on this one, well ahead of today's public servants. In establishing the University of Wyoming, the legislature directed that “the object of the university is to provide an efficient means of imparting to men and women, without regard to color, on equal terms, a liberal education.” 1886. Without regard to color, on equal terms. This was just 23 years after the Emancipation Proclamation, 78 years before the Civil Rights Act. Imparting to men *and women*. 62 years before women were admitted to Cambridge on an equal footing with men. 73 years before women were admitted to Oxford. 83 years before women were admitted to Yale. Imparting what? A liberal education.

One more thing. The letter:

I am appalled, even horrified, that you have adopted Classics as a major. As a matter of fact, I almost puked on my way home today. I am a practical man, and for the life of me I cannot possibly understand why you should wish to speak Greek.

That was written by the father of Ted Turner, millionaire philanthropist, founder of CNN, one-time owner of the Atlanta Braves. Classics didn't really seem to hurt him all that much.