Dear Editor: It has to be both.

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I hereby affirm that this is an original essay and my own work.

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Dear Editor,

The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel reported on Jan. 22 that Governor Scott Walker encouraged a gathering of school officials at the 95th annual convention of the Wisconsin Association of School Boards to rethink directing students toward a four-year liberal arts education and consider directing them toward a two-year technical education instead. The Sentinel’s Annysa Johnson reported that Governor Walker said “so many of the good paying careers we hear about every day require two-year technical degrees.”

However you feel about Governor Walker, the fact is that we have all heard this sentiment expressed many times before. It is a perfect example of the kind of rhetoric that shows up in the discussion of higher education. Some argue, like Governor Walker seems to be, that education should focus on training for jobs that are currently in demand. Others believe that an education can and should be much more than that, and that it should lay the groundwork for a meaningful life.

I am willing to bet that for many college students like myself, this debate takes place internally as well as externally. As a student in the Dodgeville school system, I grew up surrounded by a certain sense of possibility. I was blessed with several teachers who made me feel as though I could accomplish both a meaningful life and a rewarding career by paying attention to what interested me. I’m not sure I felt I could be anything, but pretty close. The
nearer I got to high school graduation, though, the more the messages my peers and I received sounded like Governor Walker’s message to the Wisconsin Association of School Boards convention. There suddenly seemed to be dichotomy; a choice between pursuing personal interests and getting paid. It even made sense in a “well, that’s life!” kind of way.

Despite this emerging dichotomy, I decided to try to balance my personal interests with career interests anyway, and carefully chose my majors to reflect this. While I won’t have the opportunity to test my choices until after I graduate, I have nonetheless often thought that I chose well. I started college as a German major after all, but soon after reasoned that an employer might find it more valuable if I spoke German, and knew something about how the different cultures of the world interact. I thought an employer might additionally like it if I had a skill set such as professional writing. It seemed to me like the perfect balance between my interests and those of my unknown future employer’s. I was working late one night at a restaurant in Mineral Point a couple of semester ago, however, and a customer asked me about my studies. I proudly told him that I am double majoring in international studies and professional writing, and he congratulated me on “identifying the two most useless majors on campus.” He laughed, and I knew he meant this reply to be funny rather than malicious, but it was a slap in the face all the same. It’s a slap that I expect many non-STEM majors can identify with and it illustrates how rigid the idea of employability can be. It reminds me of a scene from “That 70’s Show.” Laurie is home from college and informs the family that she has decided to major in philosophy. Her brother, Eric, replies “that’s good because they just opened up that philosophy factory in Green Bay.” I thought it was hilarious the first time I saw it, but I guess I never realized that some people might think that international studies or professional writing could easily take philosophy’s place in that joke. The truth is that there is no international studies factory opening
any time soon nor a professional writing factory. These phrases cannot just be plugged into job search engines to yield a list of results. The trick, and the beauty of it, lies in the time I spend considering how I can apply what I’ve learned in many different forms of employment. By doing so I understand more and more about how to assess what I have to offer employers and I learn to be more resourceful. These skills will serve me well throughout a lifetime of employment.

Furthermore, the general education classes I have taken have challenged me to think more flexibly and demonstrated that I am capable of learning in any field. Should I at some point need to go back to school to train for one of those “currently in demand” jobs, I am more than confident that I am capable of doing so. I know that my liberal arts degree has allowed me to develop the tools I need.

One last point that I think bears mentioning is that while this discussion may appear to be a recent development, it isn’t. In 1828, faculty at Yale University famously asserted, “From different quarters, we have heard the suggestion, that our colleges must be new-modelled; that they are not adapted to the spirit and wants of the age; that they will soon be deserted, unless they are better accommodated to the business character of the nation.” The rest of the report goes on to explain why this is not true, because liberal arts education is continuously adapting and updating. Almost two hundred years later and we are still having the same conversation because certain demands of life stay the same in essence; most of us must figure out a way to balance our personal growth and interests with the practicalities of life.

The thing about a liberal arts education is that it makes thinking in rigid dichotomies very difficult. If the question is whether an education should prepare students for jobs that are currently in demand, or whether it should provide the foundation for a meaningful life, then the answer has to be both because the question itself is flawed. It assumes that the answer has to be
one or the other, when in fact a meaningful life can and should also mean being prepared for a job. Being well prepared for a job should also mean having a good foundation upon which to build meaningful life. If we are prepared only for jobs, then we are nameless cogs in a machine. If we are prepared only for a world of abstract ideas, then we starve. Liberal arts education has a long history, and throughout that history, the relative merits of liberal arts education have been debated. This is exactly what should happen if liberal arts education has been done right.

Sincerely,

Hannah Helwig

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