More than a Means to an End

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I hereby affirm that this is an original essay and my own work
Dear Jason Adrians,

I’m a sophomore at the University of Wisconsin Stevens Point majoring in English Education with a Spanish minor, and I’m writing to weigh in on the value of a liberal education. This is something I’ve slowly come to see as an integral part of my college experience. I’m sure that this topic has been debated long before you were a student at UW-Eau-Claire, and it’s still relevant today. Here at Stevens Point, I often hear students complain that classes outside of their major are ‘boring’ or ‘pointless’; whenever I hear this, I can’t help but smile because I used to feel the same way.

My story starts on a hot spring day, while I was on my way to Stevens Point for my freshman orientation. I had heard of the ‘liberal’ education the university offered, but, at the time I preferred to refer to it as “a waste of time and money.” I was just a scared nervous freshman at the time but I felt confident that taking a gym class or any class outside of my major would be a waste of time. In fact, I was so confident, I argued with my mother for a good portion of the car ride there. At one point, I remember saying, “There’s no way I’m spending five hundred dollars on a gym class. I’m an English major.” However, in the presence of my advisors, my bullheadedness melted into a puddle of shear nerves and I left that day reluctantly signed up for a gym, geography, and history class. Quietly, but stubbornly, I set my mind on disliking these courses before I’d even picked up a syllabus. I think this instance illustrates the tunnel vision that all too often occurs when students spend too much time within their major: before I’d even entered college I’d somehow managed to acquire this tunnel vision, which compelled me to believe that English courses were the only ones in the sphere of academia that were relevant to me.

My first glimpse into the value of a liberal education felt a bit more like a slap to the face than a peek into an ever expanding world. It came one Friday afternoon as I sat through a two-hour long education class. This day in particular we devoted nearly the entire class to watching a video on the history of Native Americans in Wisconsin. It shocked me to learn that this history wasn’t nearly as glamorous as movies like Pocahontas had lead me to believe, but what shocked me even more was the
number of people who felt the same way. Up until the eighth grade I attended a small private school, and it was understandable to me if some key parts of my education had slipped through the cracks, but all the students around me had attended public school from day one. This day lead me to eagerly pick up Native American History along with my other second semester courses. However, this enthusiasm lacked endurance, by Thanksgiving I had already forgotten all my reasons to be outraged by the holiday. I gladly partook in eating copious amounts of turkey while surrounded by family and friends.

Slowly thanksgiving turned to winter break which turned to second semester and soon I was back in the swing of things: Native American History included. On one hand, I really wanted to love this class. It was like seeing the world while standing on your head: everything was the same, but also, nothing was. But, personally Native American History did a much better job or reminding me why I could never be a historian than ignite the passion I’d felt months before when I first discovered my interest in the topic. But, to pull myself through the struggles of the course, I regularly reminded myself how I felt on that first day many months ago that I was able to find value in what I was learning even though it didn’t enthrall me like I’d expected.

This experience and this class opened a door for me: suddenly I was able to see the importance of a liberal education. As an English major, I often run into bits and pieces of other disciplines woven into the literature that I read. My geography course allowed me to appreciate the references to plate tectonics in Naomi Benaron’s Running the Rift. A Biology course taught me the concept of Entropy and the theories of energy conservation that Tom Stoppard’s play Arcadia is founded on. I even used the philosophical theory of the gaze to gain insight on Herman Melville’s short story Bartleby the Scrivener. These threads of other disciplines that weave themselves into literature never cease to excite me. And I often wonder if I took more courses outside of my major, how much more I could understand within it.

However, I’ve always believed that the true test of a class was whether it remains relevant outside of the University. And what I failed to understand as a freshman is that the purpose of a university isn’t merely to help its students land some job – it’s to help them build a life. Since taking a philosophy course
I’ve read all of Leo Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*, a book I never would have known existed if it weren’t for my Philosophy course. Thanks to my Geography course, I’ve stopped washing my hair with shampoo and switched to baking powder and apple cider vinegar in an effort to reduce my exposure to harmful chemicals and help the environment. These classes that I’d at first written off as a waste of my time have influenced me more than I could have ever imagined.

I know I’m just a sophomore and I still have a lot more to learn, but that only excites me. I can’t wait to see where my liberal education here at Stevens Point will take me.

Sincerely,

Olivia De Valk