My Stupid Degree

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I hereby affirm that this is an original essay and my own work.
To the Morris Sun Tribune of Morris, MN:

I’m “going to school for something stupid”, says an acquaintance. He didn’t utter these words directly to me; they were left on a friend’s Facebook post discussing tuition-free college in the United States. I understood whom he was attacking, and I understood it included me and my Russian and Music Composition double majors. I was hardly shocked by his comments. They reflect attitudes prevalent in our society – attitudes that praise a technical, medical, educational, or jurisprudential education while disparaging a liberal arts one.

These notions are cultivated early; that holding a Bachelor’s degree will earn a person $21,100 per year more than simply having a high school diploma is one of the primary facts repeated to our youth to encourage them to attend college (College Board). I know I heard this from counselors and educators at Morris Area High School. I regularly see lists online, often including my major: “The 10 Worst College Majors” (Forbes, 2012), “10 Most Worthless College Majors” (Complex, 2013), “15 Dumbest College Majors if You Want to Make Money When You Graduate” (TheStreet, 2015).

In the context of our culture’s unquenchable avarice, money is the dominant factor in determining the worth of a college education, a job, or a human being. People are right to be worried about finances as the cost of higher education continues to increase. I sense this concern by reading previous letters to this paper. Rarely, though, do people seem to consider what other kinds of education happen at our nation’s liberal arts colleges and universities and what their value might be. No middle or high school student is taught to ask their guidance counselors just why college grads make $21,100 more per year than high school graduates. A boss doesn’t take two workers doing an identical job and say to one, “Well, Joe, looks like you’ve got that
Bachelor’s degree on you. Here’s an extra twenty grand!” College grads are more successful financially because of their ability to communicate, think critically, analyze, and connect concepts between two seemingly disparate disciplines. Those who have completed higher education are well-read, informed about current events, intelligently engaged in the world around them, and employed, even if they didn’t major in something “useful”, like biology, engineering, medicine, law, or a technical field.

Our society requires personal and fiscal independence, so we worry about finding and maintaining a good job in order to make a living. We seldom take into account that people with educations in humanities and the social sciences can earn more than those who majored in professional or pre-professional fields. The Association of American Colleges and Universities found in a 2013 survey that 93% of 318 surveyed employers agree that “a candidate’s demonstrated capacity to think critically, communicate clearly, and solve complex problems is more important than their undergraduate major.”

I had the same anxiety about my majors and their subsequent salaries (or lack thereof) as most others specializing in any subject deemed worthless by society. Hearing well-meaning, curious mothers of my peers ask, “What are you gonna do with those majors?” didn’t help the situation much. But this all changed the moment I enrolled for Inter-L&S 210, a new career course at UW-Madison.

At first, I was concerned about the amount of work the class required. It was only one credit out of my total 17, but the weekly journals, readings, and projects took longer than the work of any other one-credit class I’d ever taken. However, from the moment I opened up the class textbook, You Majored In What? by Katharine Brooks, I knew all the effort would be worth it.
Brooks says that traditionally, we view the path from primary education to career in a linear fashion. It’s easy to think that someone interested in business and active in business clubs at her high school might pursue a business major at college and then become a businesswoman. This does happen, but countless people enjoy fantastic careers that have nothing to do with their collegiate concentrations. Over the course of the semester, a number of alumni came to Inter-L&S 210 to talk to us about their experiences. One woman, Jennifer LaMontagne, explained how after earning her Bachelor’s of Science in Mathematics from UW-Madison, she took a job as a portfolio manager, worked for Sony’s Investor Relations Department, became a project manager and research analyst, and coordinated networks. This was all before she landed her current position as the Chief of Staff of a global wealth and assets management firm. Was there any possible way LaMontagne could have known her career path in college? Of course not. All of her past experiences lit the way for new opportunities.

A few weeks into the course, we were assigned an activity that entirely changed my attitude about my majors and dispelled my biggest worries. We were to create “major maps” where we mapped out what we did in each of our majors and how they could relate to skills employers desire in the workforce. I found that setting aside time to practice an instrument required discipline and self-motivation. Making sure I knew my part in choir and listening to those around me to achieve the best sound required effective teamwork skills. Befriending and convincing performers to play my pieces required top-notch communication. Building creative models of solo flute pieces in my composition course taught me how to extrapolate data from sets and think outside the box. Picking a piano piece to arrange for orchestra and meticulously proofreading each part showed me that the more time and effort I put into a project, the more
pride I’d take in the final result. I could finally begin to cast off the doubt and shame that society had subconsciously instilled in me.

Many believe that an education’s purpose is to prepare our country’s youth for a career, but they fail to realize that this career may change many times in their lives and that any one job may or may not be directly or obviously related to a person’s college major. The average American worker holds ten jobs before the age of 40, and only a liberal arts education can truly prepare someone to succeed in them all.

Perhaps society is so keen to expect a concrete life plan from a 20-year-old and dismiss a liberal education because we need stability. We want to know that our biology degree will lead to med school and a successful life as a doctor. But imagining our futures as straight roads that lead to success (if only we chose the right majors) is harmful. This mindset stresses out students, parents, educators, and communities, and asserts that some dreams are better than others. We need a paradigm shift – instead of pushing students down a linear path, we should encourage them to branch out. The breadth of a liberal arts education is meant to provide as many opportunities as possible for students to learn vital skills and abilities that they can use in the workforce and in their personal lives.

Even if I don’t ultimately become a composer, I know I’ll approach my work creatively from an interdisciplinary standpoint, communicate effectively with those around me, and be able to find and succeed at a job I truly enjoy, even if it doesn’t exist yet. My life’s path will ascend, descend, and meander back and forth. I wouldn’t have it any other way, and I can’t wait for the ride ahead.