The measure of an education

UW System Liberal Arts Essay Scholarship Competition

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I’ll admit to being a politics nerd. I first caught the bug when I saw an episode of The West Wing in my high school civics class, and I've yet to find a cure. So I follow the presidential election process pretty closely, watching interviews with the candidates and catching every primary debate.

Of course, some have been more memorable than others. For instance, in the fourth Republican primary debate on November 10, 2015, Marco Rubio let fly a zinger that’s stuck with me: "For the life of me, I don’t know why we have stigmatized vocational training. Welders make more money than philosophers. We need more welders and less philosophers."

Being a philosophy minor, I couldn’t help but feel a little hurt.

But the next day, I was vindicated as news outlets pointed out that Rubio was wrong: out of the gate, philosophy majors rake in an average first-year salary of $42,000, according to PayScale. The Bureau of Labor Statistics puts the median (not first-year) salary for welders in the neighborhood of $37,420.

My classmates and professors chuckled – “Fact-check before you speak, Marco!” – and, for the most part, moved on.

But this episode has stuck in my head — not because I took the attack on philosophers to heart, but because it’s indicative of the assumptions that many make about the liberal arts. Our heads are in the clouds, they say, and our bank accounts are empty.

And honestly, that second part doesn’t bother me in itself. Money is important, of course, but I’m not worried that I’m not making as much as the engineer (or welder) next door. What I am worried about is that the value of my education is being weighed against the money it will make me later. Education is an investment, true. But the returns can’t – and shouldn’t be – counted in dollars.
Yet this is precisely what’s happening. At universities and colleges across the country, education is more and more being viewed as a formula. The student puts in money in exchange for marketable job skills, which in turn buy a job with a comfortable salary.

Incorporating more vocational training into the college experience is a great idea, don’t get me wrong. But if the goal of a university is to equip students with the specific skills that jobs demand, we might as well scrap the liberal arts. Sure, you can improve your writing in a literature class, but you can also do it in a technical writing seminar. You can learn to research and cite sources in a biology class as surely as in a history class.

The idea of teaching to the market is so pervasive in higher education that it’s found in the very heart of the humanities themselves. This fall, sitting in a history class with primarily non-liberal arts majors, I listened to my professor say, “Now, I know you probably won’t use any of the history after this class, but these essay-writing skills we’re learning? Those you can put on a résumé.”

My heart broke a little to hear that. This is a person who thinks history is important — important enough to dedicate her life to studying it — telling students that what they’re going to take away from a history course is not a deeper understanding of the world and their place in it. What they’re going to get are job skills.

Contrast this with one of my most memorable experiences in the last year – which, incidentally, also happened in a history class. It was after a construction worker’s truck sporting a Confederate flag grille cover caused a stir on campus. Since my class had already spent some time talking about the legacy of the Civil War, it seemed natural to discuss the incident, what it meant, and how we as individuals and as a community should react.
What followed was a difficult, complicated, and at times uncomfortable conversation. Some people suggested that the university’s reaction was too extreme; some questioned whether the flag is inherently offensive. Others talked about feeling excluded from or attacked by discussions about racial justice because of their skin color. (Everyone in the class was white.)

It was a challenging discussion. But it was also incredibly thought-provoking and engaging. As it was in a history class, we worked to add historical context to each other’s comments. We asked each other questions, and listened to the answers. Students clarified, qualified, and in some cases changed their opinions.

Of course, we didn’t fix racism in one class period. But it was one of the most interesting experiences I’ve had in a classroom, and I don’t think it could have happened in the way it did outside the context of a liberal arts education.

Why is this? What sets a liberal arts education apart from a more vocational education?

The difference begins with the kind of questions they ask. In my philosophy classes, it’s not enough to articulate, for example, what Kant thought constituted ethical behavior. We are expected to engage with the material on a deeper level. My professors push further, asking: Is Kant’s reasoning sound? What assumptions does he make about human nature? Do you agree with him?

In a different classroom, a business teacher isn’t going to ask her students, “Do you agree with the formula for compound interest?” And it’s not because the material is any less useful or important, but because philosophy, and the liberal arts in general, are pursuing very different goals.

Vocation training imparts skills, to be sure, but these skills are meant solve immediate problems rather than to seek a deeper truth. The liberal arts are about experiencing multiple points of view and questioning our own, becoming both more critical and more empathetic, and developing a
more nuanced understanding of the world and our place in it. It’s only in using these admittedly
unmarketable skills that we can begin to explore truths about the way the world is and the way it
ought to be.

I’ve heard this difference described another way: A vocational education can teach you how
to find answers, but a liberal arts education can teach you how to ask the questions.

Most of my fellow students aren’t going on to be historians or professors of English. They’ll be
recreational therapists and x-ray technicians, nurses and engineers, marketing consultants and
entrepreneurs – and of course their education should give them specific skills they need to succeed in
those fields.

But beyond their varied careers, they will be friends, parents, and teachers. They will be
citizens of the world. These roles are the ones for which our education is preparing us, equipping us
with empathy, creativity, and critical thought. Vocational training can make us what we will be. But
done right, a liberal arts education lets us become who we ought to be.

The value of that education is beyond measure.