

The Value of an Education

Nearly every college student, at some point during their academic career, will be asked, “So what are you going to do with that degree?” Although this question seems to be a simple curiosity about the future, it shows a wide misconception in our society that the entire purpose of a degree is to get a job. While it is true that individuals who have a degree will likely enter a higher paying career than those who do not, the belief that university-equals-career creates a culture where people do not value education as something important in itself. Strangely, there also seems to be a disconnect between this idea and the lack of student involvement in Trade Schools or Apprenticeships. If the whole point of a degree is to get a job, then why not skip the university experience altogether and go straight for the skills of the career? Students all over the world are scrambling to get into college, but once accepted, these students spend the next few years complaining that they must complete General Education requirements instead of learning their preferred career’s required skills. The value of their education is unclear and society has taught them that they will never need to know anything beyond technical skills. They will spend thousands of dollars on their education merely to get a job that pays more money- regardless of their own happiness.

Ryan Costanzo is a student that came to Utah State University for that very reason. “I initially came to Utah State University because I was planning on going into Mechanical Engineering, that was my declared major,” he said. Costanzo explained that money had been a source of stress for a few years and he had very little money to pay for his education. “I was getting ready to go to college and realized that I had hardly any money *to go* to college and so I thought, ‘I don’t want money to be tight anymore, so I’m going to go to college in mechanical engineering, get a well-paying job, and not have money problems anymore.’” However, upon

reaching USU, Costanzo realized that mechanical engineering was not the major he had hoped it would be. “I took a couple of classes and I hated them. So, I went undeclared for a year or two, and during that time I took a whole bunch of philosophy classes.” Costanzo ended up taking a special topics philosophy class from Dr. Kleiner entitled, “What is an Educated Person?” “We talked about the purpose of a university and how the goal is to grow intellectually and socially, and how once you are the kind of person that has undergone that kind of growth you’re a more capable human being. Then you can go into any [field] you want because you’ve figured out how to think, and how to learn and communicate.”

Costanzo continued to take more philosophy courses and eventually switched to the Philosophy major. While this degree does not necessarily guarantee job placement immediately after graduation, Costanzo says, “I am confident that this degree has given me the ability to think, communicate, reason, and learn. I think that will help me be successful in whatever I do.” Philosophy is an easily overlooked or dismissed degree, but Philosophy majors are actually known to score higher on the GRE and LSAT than most majors. When it comes to choosing a major, despite the lack of job placement, Costanzo believes he made the right decision, “In the end, I’m happier and I learned more. No amount of learning that I did in my mechanical engineering classes ever would have put me anywhere close to the kind of learning that I did getting my philosophy degree.”

A university is a place of learning and growth, and is most often a student’s first experience living away from their parents. Through classes and outside encounters, students are given the chance to learn new information as well as the social skills that are necessary in adult life. The opportunities that are available at a university serve to broaden students’ intellects and not simply help them to develop specific job skills. Global Communications major, Kylie

Christopherson is one of many students that have experienced this. She began at USU hoping to complete a Sociology degree. After taking a linguistics course required for the major, Christopherson was inspired to begin learning a second language. Soon after taking her first Spanish class, she realized that she had a passion for language and culture, and began to explore new majors that would connect well with these passions. She discovered the Global Communications major which involves a variety of classes covering fields in linguistics, culture, government, and languages. Christopherson decided to switch her major and will graduate with a B.A. in Global Communications, May 2017. In order to receive their degree, Global Communications majors are required to complete a Practicum which entails 135 hours of work beyond the classroom in a setting that will help the student to gain intercultural knowledge, usually in the specific language they have chosen. For her practicum, Christopherson decided work with “Charity Anywhere Foundation” and travel to Tijuana, Mexico where she spent 7 days helping a family restore and expand their home. The 18-hour drive to her destination gave her time to consider her situation, “I realized I felt very unprepared and almost decided to stay home. I was afraid of the people. All the news of Tijuana I'd heard had been robberies, kidnappings, murders, and a general sense of filthiness. All of my family and friends were quite worried for me and gave me a lot of advice. I had packed things I would feel ok with losing because I practically expected to be robbed.” Less than two days after arriving, Christopherson began to feel differently about this city and its people. By the end of the trip, her outlook had changed completely. “I wish I could count the ways that my mind and thoughts were changed about that beautiful city. It's hard to express how endeared I feel toward the culture there. I feel like I've gained a hundred years since that first day because it's difficult to remember being anxious and scared of the people. After that first day, I never felt in danger; I wasn't ever in

danger, and I came back with all the things I brought [with me]. My mind and heart have been changed. I would go back in a heartbeat and likely will.” After graduation, Christopherson hopes to work with refugees or at an English language center to help others.

This experience did not serve as training for a future job, or as an internship with vast networking opportunities, but instead provided a chance for growth and learning which is what the university experience should be most concerned with. It is reasonable, however, to wonder what the next step is after graduation. Often times, the Liberal Arts are given a bad reputation or thought to be “useless” degrees with no opportunities for careers beyond the classroom. CEO of Starbucks, Howard Schultz (B.A. in Communication), or former Hewlett Packard CEO, Carly Fiorina (B.A. in Medieval History and Philosophy), would most likely disagree with these sentiments, as does recent USU graduate, Kaleb Esplin, who completed his degree from USU December 2016, in Communications Studies. Esplin plans to become a dentist, and while there may be other majors that are preferred by employers or graduate schools, he explained, “I chose communications because it was what I was passionate about. I recognized that my time at college was about enjoying what I was studying and exploring my passions. By doing so, I got better grades, developed my passions, and most of all, feel that I am getting the most out of my education. This all rubbed off on my applications and interviews, and I still got accepted to dental school despite not having a stereotypical major.” Technical skills are important in any career, but as Esplin and others are trying to convey, the purpose of an education is more than just gaining those skills. For those struggling to choose a major, Esplin has some advice, “For those of us who are feeling the pressure to major in something because it is ‘preferred,’ ask yourself this: Would you rather spend four years studying things you are not interested in, don't feel applies to you, or you do not enjoy all in the name of jumping through a hoop someone is

holding in front of you? Or would you rather spend four years studying something that you are passionate about, helps you become a better person, and makes you enjoy being on campus? Maybe your major of choice is not Communication Studies, but don't let some arbitrary "preferred major" dictate how you spend your life at Utah State. Choose something you're passionate about and use this time to its fullest. Everything will fall into place." For those who are passionate about business, mechanical engineering, biology, or computer science, your degree is awesome and there is no doubt that you will help make great advances for society. For those who are passionate about art, history, philosophy, communication, or language, do not hesitate to major in something that you love because you are afraid there are no careers after graduation. That is simply untrue, and after all, education is about *who* you become, not what you become.

By Sarina Hicken