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Some Advantages of Interdisciplinary Study, Post-Graduation

Daphne Stanford · Wednesday, March 9th, 2016

There are powerful forces with a vested interest in making sure we're all scared into believing STEM majors are the only college majors worthy of our time—i.e. investment. To the business world, the students of the world represent workers, and potential workers they are. However, in my opinion, that's a considerably depressing view of the purpose of a college education. Moreover, it's a picture we should resist, because the alternate possibility is a world of automatons being marched toward their inevitable fates as docile, compliant workers who essentially function as cogs in an economic wheel.

Traditionally, a liberal arts education was intended to prepare students to enter the world as educated, well-balanced citizens with a good general breadth—as well as depth—of knowledge. The reasoning behind breadth of knowledge still stands: it doesn't make a lot of sense to be highly-informed about a particular field at the expense of all the others—in part because hyper-focus makes it difficult to be able to speak to current events and philosophical problems in a very informed way: it's difficult to think critically about a political issue related to climate science or evolution, for example, if you majored in a humanities-based field but were never required to take any science classes in college.

The view of education that merely sees students as future workers lends more credence to the narrow-but-focused approach, such as what is achieved via technical and vocational programs, or by lending more weight to STEM-based fields that are 'practical' and prepare students for lucrative careers in computer science or engineering. However, it's simply not as clear-cut as majoring in a 'lucrative' field. As Elaina Provencio argues, "Every individual is just that, an individual. You define yourself by the work and advantages that you bring to the table. Not every Software Engineer is successful, and not every Philosophy major is unemployed. One's major does not define one's future."

Despite these caveats to STEM-centric thinking, there are a large number of liberal arts naysayers—many of them can be found writing for conservative sites like The Federalist—making claims like "'liberal' education that involves "critical thinking" disappeared decades ago, to be replaced by hyper-sensitive grievance mongering." It's almost as if fields like comparative literature and philosophy were absent of classes like Logic and Critical Theory. In spite of grumpy curmudgeons who argue for hard science at the expense of the humanities, many up-and-coming tech companies, for example, Slack and Facebook, hold communication, writing, and critical thinking skills in high demand—more so, in fact, than 'hard skills' such as math and coding.

There are also lots of ways to incorporate various skills and interests into one career. One prime example is applying knowledge about information systems to a career as a librarian. The Internet has transformed the role of librarian to such a great extent that many positions now include the word 'information' in the title, rather than anything about books. Part of the reason for this is the

new focus on digital archives, database articles, and other types of reference information—all of which is accessible online. You might choose to be an Information Architect of a company, a Systems Analyst at a university, or a traditional librarian in a public library, school, or college setting.

It's also possible to specialize in information systems in a healthcare-based setting, such as a hospital, community center, or medical clinic. Part of the reason for the recent abundance of jobs related to healthcare technology is the passing of the Health Information Technology for Economic and Clinical Health (HITECH) Act, which increased funding for electronic healthcare records and health-related information technology by almost $26 billion. Because of this recent influx in funding, there is now a high demand for professionals with interdisciplinary knowledge in both healthcare and information technology. This career requires the ability to develop effective algorithms, as well as analyze big data and provide tools to help visualize that data for end-users—all of which are skills taught in a Computer Information Systems program.

Because of the move to digital records and an always-increasing focus on information technology and online databases of knowledge, there are a number of disciplines one could combine with information technology, now. There are other subject combinations possible: business management, education, and law are a few other disciplines that one could combine with a seemingly infinite number of subjects, to offer a few examples. However, let's not forget the initial examples of Slack and Facebook, who employ a good number of liberal arts majors.

Encouragingly, there's a trend among big tech employers to look beyond STEM fields toward STEAM—in which A stands for the arts: "It's not enough to be technologically brilliant," says Larry Quinlan, Deloitte's chief information officer. "We need senior people who understand business processes, too." Beyond well-rounded preparation for careers, however, there is our time spent off the clock. As Fareed Zakaria reminds us, Greece began experimenting with a democracy 2,500 years ago that required "an innovation in education" for which basic sustenance skills were no longer sufficient.

The more sophisticated skills of civic management and self-governance can only be learned via critical thinking and the study of human behavior, such as that which is gleaned via study of the liberal arts and higher-order philosophical thought. Such thought is worthwhile but complex and difficult, not accessible via straightforward math or coding skills, but rather via critical thinking and a well-rounded understanding of the nuances of existence. These are challenges with answers not easily regurgitated via multiple choice tests. Rather, they require the kind of attention that can be demonstrated in a thoughtful, well-written essay—the kind of essay writing that is taught as part of a well-rounded liberal arts curriculum—and manifests itself in the form of individuals who, when living in relative harmony together, manage to form a democracy.

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