Off Campus: No need to choose between career, deep thoughts

Colleges must adapt to produce grads with skills that ensure both good jobs and good citizenship.

By JOSEPH McDonnell

PORTLAND - University students today are far more likely to pursue a major in the sciences, technology, business, accounting, engineering or nursing than students in previous generations. The reason: jobs. Graduates in these majors are more likely -- or at least they think they are more likely -- to secure jobs that lead to careers.

Responding to this change, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and Harvard College independently issued reports recently raising concern that fewer students are pursuing majors in the humanities -- history, philosophy, languages, the arts and English literature. According to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the number of students completing an undergraduate degree in the humanities decreased 50 percent in the past four decades.

Is there any wonder students today seek more vocational majors, considering the high cost of tuition, the debt they are amassing and the scarcity of jobs for graduates? Students and their parents are simply trying to maximize the return on their considerable investment in higher education.

Nonetheless, these reports make a strong case for obtaining a liberal arts education. Its benefits include developing a capacity for critical thinking, creativity and communicating to diverse audiences. The liberal arts provide the building blocks for a democratic society, giving students a global perspective and the tools for civic engagement including compassion for people of different races, cultures, creeds and sexual orientations.

Ironically, these are many of the same skills employers are seeking from college graduates. In a recent survey of businesses and nonprofits nationwide, the Association of American Colleges and Universities found that more than 75 percent of employers want increased emphasis on critical thinking, complex problem-solving, written and oral communication, and applied knowledge in real-world settings. Employers complain that new graduates cannot communicate -- that while technically proficient, they lack the soft skills necessary to make organizations successful.

Why do students have to choose between preparing for a career and pursuing the broader education offered by the liberal arts? Why do we educate one set of students for jobs and another for citizenship? Universities ought to rethink the college major and give students both career preparation and a liberal education. There is enough room in the curriculum to accomplish both objectives, especially as programs focus more on competencies mastered than courses completed.
The historic divide between liberal and career-oriented education arose due to the difference between the upper and lower classes. The aristocracy enjoyed the luxury of studying the classics and pursuing knowledge for its own sake, while the working class sought more practical training to earn a living. But that's an outmoded view of education. Today's students want to come away from a university education with the tools to pursue a career, not drift without direction following graduation.

Education ought to be vocational in the larger sense that universities are educating students for many vocations. We ought to be educating students to be inquisitive lifelong learners, to be citizens as well as employees -- and to be members of families, communities and social, political and religious organizations. Students are called to all these aspects of life, and universities ought to develop students to excel in each of these vocations.

What about general education? Aren't general education requirements supposed to give the career-oriented major the opportunity to gain a liberal education?

In a well-coordinated program with common faculty and clear objectives, this might be accomplished. But at most universities, students are simply required to take a number of courses in different categories without demonstrable outcomes or connection among these courses. A single course in composition rarely produces proficient communicators.

Just as students in career-oriented majors would gain from studying the liberal arts, so too liberal arts majors ought to leave college with career-oriented skills. While these students might not be interested in becoming accountants, engineers or nurses, universities could offer them preparation to pursue careers in professional writing, public relations, general management, sales, design, tourism and entrepreneurship.

The integration of liberal and career-oriented majors can also be accomplished through the combination of liberal arts undergraduate degrees and career-oriented graduate programs. Successful 3-2 or 4-1 programs permit students to complete both an undergraduate and graduate program in a condensed time frame and at less cost than taking the two programs independently.

As universities rethink their value propositions, they ought to consider integrating career and liberal education. The Harvard report suggested that its humanities program would have to change to appeal to a wider group of students. Career-oriented majors might make a similar adjustment by imaginatively entering into partnerships with the humanities. Students, society and employers would be the beneficiaries of such combinations.

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