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# Vocation or Exploration? Pondering the Purpose of College

By ALINA TUGEND

OUR oldest son is finishing up his junior year in high school, and we're already overwhelmed by what I've been calling the college challenge — trying to figure out what college he can get into and what we can afford.

But there's also a bigger debate raging that hovers over all our concerns. What exactly is a university education for?

Is it, narrowly, to ensure a good job after graduation? That's how Rick Scott, the governor of Florida, views it. He has made waves by wanting to shift state financing of public colleges to majors that have the best job prospects. Hello science, technology, engineering and math; goodbye psychology and anthropology.

And Senator Ron Wyden, Democrat of Oregon, has introduced the Student Right to Know Before You Go Act, which would require, among other things, that students have access to data on university graduates' average annual earnings.

Or is the point of a university degree to give students a broad and deep humanities education that teaches them how to think and write critically? Or can a college education do both?

A little background: Before 1983, receiving a bachelor of arts degree in just about any subject "opened up lots of jobs," said Anthony P. Carnevale, director of Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce. "You could get a B.A. in history and become an accountant. Then the economy underwent a cultural shift."

Why the early 1980s? It was a combination of the deep recession of 1980-82 and the growth of computer-based technology.

"We started to see a widening distribution of earnings by majors," said Professor Carnevale, who also served as chairman of the National Commission on Employment Policy under President Bill Clinton.

And that trend has continued. "I was raised to think what you needed was a college degree," he said. "That's not the game anymore. It's what you major in."

So does that mean I should urge our son to pursue a degree he doesn't have any interest in because it may provide him with a higher-paying job — or any job, for that matter — after college?

No, Professor Carnevale said, because if you don't like what you do, you won't do it well. The point is that "young people now need to have a strategy," he said. "If you major in art, realize you will have to get a master's degree. The economic calculus has changed."

Alex Tabarrok, an associate professor of economics at George Mason University and author of the e-book “Launching the Innovation Renaissance” (TED Books), is not just worried about students finishing four years of college with no jobs, but also that they may never get to the graduation podium at all.

“At least 40 percent of students drop out of four-year universities before graduation, and it’s even higher out of community colleges,” he said. “We have the highest college dropout rate in the industrialized world. Everyone recognizes that something is not quite right.”

Mr. Tabarrok said that we, as a country, needed to look more closely at emulating apprenticeship programs offered in European countries that turn out highly skilled workers.

“We tend to look down on vocational training in the United States, but in Europe, that’s where the majority of the kids go,” he said. “The U.S. mind-set is that there is only one road to an education and to do anything else admits defeat.”

There are two main arguments against pushing more students into vocational training. The first is that it pigeonholes them in careers at a young age.

“We don’t want a system where people are tracked from early on,” said Andrew Delbanco, a professor of humanities at Columbia University and author of the new book “College: What It Was, Is, and Should Be” (Princeton University Press).

The second is that a good liberal arts degree isn’t simply a luxury when economic times are good, but a necessity at all times to create an engaged citizenry, he said.

“The university should be a place for reflection for the young to explore areas of the human experience, to be fully aware of history and the arts,” Professor Delbanco said. “We don’t want to have a population that has technical competence but is not able to think critically about the issues that face us as a society.”

Professor Tabarrok argued, however, that the way the system was set up now, “We’re denying students a hands-on education.” A lot of high school students, he said, “would love to be paid to work alongside adults and learn.”

Do we have to land on one side or another? Not necessarily. To Anne Colby, a consulting professor at Stanford University and author of “Rethinking Undergraduate Business Education” (Jossey-Bass, 2011), the idea that we have to choose between vocational training and the rich, deep learning we associate with liberal arts is a false dichotomy.

She and her colleagues studied undergraduate business programs around the country — which more college students major in than any other field — and discovered that the best programs combined major elements of a liberal arts education and professional training.

One example, she said, is the Pathways program at Santa Clara University in California, in which students in all majors take thematically based sequences of courses that draw together several disciplines. Sustainability, the idea that the current generation can meet its needs without sacrificing future generations’, can be studied, for example, from the point of view of business, history, philosophy and politics. And at Indiana University, the Liberal Arts and Management Program

offers interdisciplinary courses like “The History of the Automobile: Economy, Politics and Culture.” This program enables students to learn their specialty in the context of history, literature and other liberal arts.

“Universities need to be more creative in their thinking,” she said. And while internships can help bring a practical piece, faculty members need to oversee what is being learned and connect it back to the rest of the academic learning — something that is not done enough, she said.

José Luis Santos, an assistant professor of education at the University of California, Los Angeles, also said it was possible for four-year institutions to offer a solid humanities base along with specialization.

“Colleges and universities eventually respond to market needs all the time,” he said. One example, he said, was how they stepped in to offer Arabic language training when the demand rose for it after Sept. 11.

“That’s a very good example of realigning to meet market needs,” he said. “Colleges and universities eventually respond. It’s just at a slow pace. The critique is that they don’t do it in a timely manner.”

Although much of this is out of an individual student’s control, a student (and his parents) can try to think strategically. That doesn’t mean entering a major you have no interest in, but using all the resources your institution offers to help think about a career before graduation rolls around.

“Some colleges and universities have pretty creative career placement offices that provide events with people in the field,” Professor Colby said. “Take advantage of all the extracurricular activities and speakers. And look for coursework that involves the application of knowledge and real-world themes.”

And be a part of the debate. Things are changing, and that’s not necessarily bad. As Professor Tabarrok said, “Just because something worked in the past doesn’t mean it’s going to work in the new world we have now.”

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