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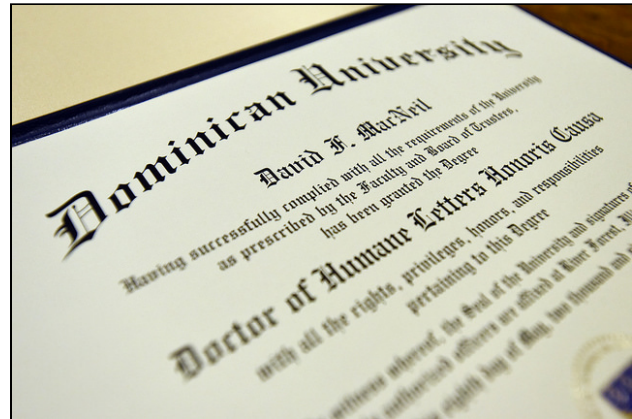
Will the 'right' college major get you a job?

By Glenn Altschuler
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A common question that most students in college, or preparing to apply for college, get is 'what do you want to major in?' But how much does your major in college truly matter? In this informational text, Glenn Altschuler discusses how important the major you choose in college is to your success after college. As you read, take notes on what drives people to choose certain majors in college.

- [1] A college education provides lots of benefits. Those benefits include acquiring skills, identifying interests, learning about others across time and space, and establishing personal and professional connections.

Abundant evidence exists that college graduates are more mature and self-confident, better citizens, healthier, wealthier and happier than individuals who do not have an undergraduate degree.



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As the cost of attendance has skyrocketed, however, students and their parents are focusing more and more on short-term considerations. Does college constitute a sound financial investment? Will a graduate get a good job with a high salary?

College myths and misconceptions

In *Will College Pay Off?*, Peter Cappelli, a professor of management and director of the Center for Human Resources at the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania, draws on existing data on employment and higher education in the United States to provide some surprising and provocative answers to these questions.

- [5] In the process, he busts pervasive¹ myths and misconceptions.

Cappelli acknowledges that the average college graduate now earns considerably more than a person with a high school degree and that the gap between them is growing.

He points out, however, that the "college wage premium," the difference between the annual and lifetime earnings of college graduates and those who do not have an undergraduate degree, has been volatile² in the United States over time. As recently as the 1960s and the '70s, no gap existed. The current gap is higher for workers who have been out of college longer.

1. **Pervasive (adjective):** spreading widely throughout an area or group of people
2. **Volatile (adjective):** able to change rapidly and unpredictably, especially for the worse

Cappelli implies that it may well narrow sometime soon.

In Italy and China, for example, college grads are no more successful than high school grads in the job market.

- [10] According to Cappelli, the current labor force is overeducated — a controversial claim at variance with recommendations by the President’s Council on Jobs and Competitiveness and other organizations dominated by corporate executives, who, Cappelli implies, have an interest in generating a surplus³ of qualified workers.

The average worker, he indicates, has about 30% more education than his or her job requires. About 60% of parking lot attendants have some college education. To document his conclusion, Cappelli includes the results of a survey on employment outcomes 2010-2012 conducted by the Center for Economic and Policy Research.

The survey shows that 22% of recent graduates in engineering, 23% in education, 26% in health, 31% in math and computing, 36% in sciences, 43% in architecture and construction, 47% in social sciences, 48% in agriculture and natural resources, 51% in business, 55% in the liberal arts, 56% in communications and 56% in leisure and hospitality were in jobs where a bachelor’s degree was not required!

Encouraging a job-specific major is wrong advice

Cappelli insists as well that the assumptions about the (decidedly positive) average financial impact of a college education have limited utility. One reason is that graduation rates have declined significantly, with fewer than 60% of students, many of them laden with loans, getting a degree six years after they entered as freshmen.

There are also dramatic differences between the “sticker price”⁴ and the tuition and fees families actually pay. Also, the variation across schools and fields for those who do graduate is quite large. Additionally, there is an excessive emphasis these days on first jobs, even though they are no longer a reliable indicator of a successful career path.

- [15] Equally important, Cappelli maintains that choosing a major in a field that is “hot,” an approach many politicians want to tie to financial support, is a “fool’s errand.”

For one thing, labor markets are notoriously⁵ volatile. In response to the fracking⁶ boom, for example, enrollments in petroleum engineering have tripled; this huge surge, he predicts, will soon make the field as unattractive as it was in the 1980s.

And, contrary to conventional wisdom, there does not appear to be a shortage of “STEM” (science, technology, engineering, math) grads. While the number of STEM grads is increasing dramatically, only 22% of recent undergraduates who completed majors in science and math got jobs using these skills.

3. excess

4. the advertised price of an item, like the one on the sticker of a new car

5. **Notorious** (*adjective*): well-known for something bad

6. the process of drilling into the Earth and injecting high pressure fluid to release gas and oil

Cappelli also asserts that the increasingly pervasive tendency to push students into specialized, occupation-specific courses or majors — in animation, invasive cardiovascular technology, bakery science, turf and turf grass management, fire protection engineering — “may well be exactly the wrong advice.”

Just pursue your passion

Employers prefer to hire people who have decision-making, organizational and planning, problem-solving, writing and communication skills.

- [20] These skills, Cappelli suggests, are best learned in liberal arts programs. Currently derided⁷ by proponents of a more “practical” curriculum, the liberal arts, he writes, “may make the greatest intellectual and learning demands on students of any field.”

To be sure, a liberal arts degree does not come with a guarantee of a big financial payoff. But then again, despite implicit and explicit promises, neither do the much ballyhooed⁸ applied vocational⁹ degrees.

Sending a child to college is often the most significant decision a family makes. A college degree can, and often does, pay substantial dividends (some of them financial) on that investment.

But the relationship between the choice of a specific institution and a major and a lucrative¹⁰ and fulfilling first job and career is complicated. It has lots of moving parts.

And so the best advice to prospective students may well be advice that has been around for a long time: after factoring in need-based financial aid and/or merit-based scholarships, go to the college with the best students and the most distinguished faculty.

- [25] Major in what interests you most and what you are best at.

[“Will the ‘right’ college major get you a job?”](#) by Glenn Altschuler, Cornell University, June 3, 2015. Copyright © The Conversation 2015, CC-BY-ND.

7. **Deride** (*verb*): to express contempt for; ridicule
8. praised
9. relating to an occupation or employment
10. **Lucrative** (*adjective*): producing a great deal of profit

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which statement best expresses the central idea of the text?
 - A. Having a college degree isn't valuable right now, as there are few jobs that actually require people to have a degree.
 - B. It's difficult to measure the long-term financial payoffs that certain majors will yield, which is why it's best to choose majors based on your interests and strengths.
 - C. Students should focus on occupation-specific majors, as they're more likely to be placed into jobs immediately after graduating.
 - D. While liberal art degrees don't prepare students for a specific job, they give widely applicable skills that all employers value.

2. PART B: Which detail from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
 - A. "He points out, however, that the 'college wage premium,' the difference between the annual and lifetime earnings of college graduates and those who do not have an undergraduate degree, has been volatile in the United States over time." (Paragraph 7)
 - B. "51% in business, 55% in the liberal arts, 56% in communications and 56% in leisure and hospitality were in jobs where a bachelor's degree was not required!" (Paragraph 12)
 - C. "Currently derided by proponents of a more 'practical' curriculum, the liberal arts, he writes, 'may make the greatest intellectual and learning demands on students of any field.'" (Paragraph 20)
 - D. "But the relationship between the choice of a specific institution and a major and a lucrative and fulfilling first job and career is complicated. It has lots of moving parts." (Paragraph 23)

3. What is the author's overall purpose in the text?
 - A. to encourage students to go to college to chase their passion, rather than get a job
 - B. to criticize colleges for not helping students locate jobs after they leave college
 - C. to suggest that students consider alternatives to college, as there's no guarantee that it'll pay off
 - D. to show how there is no proven path through college that guarantees a high-paying job

4. How has the gap between what college graduates earn and what people without a degree earn, according to the text, change over time?
- A. The author shows how the earning gap between people with degrees and people without has varied over time, and will likely diminish in the future.
 - B. The author describes how people without degrees have begun to earn closer to those with degrees as they enter programs that prepare them for a specific job.
 - C. The author emphasizes how there will be little to no wage gap between what those with college degrees and those without earn, as the job market becomes more competitive.
 - D. The author shows how the earning gap between people with degrees and people without is widening as employers become more desperate for skilled workers.
5. What is the relationship between the major students choose and their future success? Cite evidence from the text to support your response.
