The benefits of liberal arts education

Education, Learning

I'll be honest, up until a couple months ago, I had no idea what the differences were between a liberal arts education compared to, say, their more research-based counterparts like STEM and/or business. Growing up in Malaysia, especially in a Chinese-Asian household, I was always told that I had to grow up and be a doctor or a lawyer to make my family proud; that education was the only deciding factor in whether a person succeeds and goes on to make tons of money, or fails and goes on to wander the streets homeless. Although in hindsight, that concept is, at best, partially true, the point still stands. A lot of people, especially the Baby Boomer and Baby Bust (Gen X) generation – that grew up with very limited resources when it came to education – hold a college degree to a very high standard. Back in the days, a college education was fairly exclusive and was only reserved for the rich and wealthy, so most people from that generation didn't receive a college degree before joining the workforce. However, after centuries of development and higher education being more and more accessible, our society has come a long way from America's first college institution – Harvard – whose inaugural graduating class of 1642 contained just 9 men, to their most recent graduating class of 2018 expected to contain around 3. 9 million graduates (according to the National Center for Education Studies).

These days, a college education is no longer a privilege, it's a necessity – the bare minimum in today's competitive working environment. And although it has its pros, it certainly also has its cons. Mainly, the soaring cost of college tuition, and subsequently crippling student loan debt. According to CollegeBoard, tuition and fees at public and private colleges have doubled from 1988 to 2018, even when you account for inflation, yet more and more

Americans are getting college degrees. So then that begs the question, what is a college degree for? Most people will tell you that it's to help you get a job, which is why increased specialization in college is far better than a liberal arts education. However, I don't necessarily agree with that. Allow me to explain.

A classic liberal arts education involves the study of the humanities, like history, literature, writing, philosophy, and etc. However, a more modern take on a liberal arts education is an education that offers one expansive area of study that aims to provide general knowledge in a certain field, whereas research-based universities may take the same major and break it down into 2 or 3 different paths and offer more professional or technical subjects. I will admit, statistically speaking, it is definitely true that STEM graduates will earn more money right after graduating compared to liberal arts graduates. However, a recent study conducted by PayScale showed that although Business and Computer Science majors tend to make more in the initial phase of their careers because of their technical skills, liberal arts majors usually catch up and even surpass some of their counterparts over a lifetime. This, in my opinion, is due to the essential skills that are instilled through a liberal arts education. Skills like communication, collaboration, creativity, and critical thinking, just to name a few. Due to their ability to adapt quickly and solve problems, liberal arts graduates can often be seen in off-the-beaten-path roles that help fill a certain position that might not necessarily be related to their major. This, coupled with the realisation that more than 40% of college graduates take positions that don't require their degree, and more than 20% still aren't working in their related field a decade

after leaving school, made me value the core principles of a liberal arts education over the technical skills that are learned at a research-based university. The ever-changing job market frightens me to a certain extent. What may be in demand today, like computer science and engineering, might be obsolete in 2 to 3 decades, but skills like critical thinking, relationship building, and story-telling will always be needed in the workforce.

Aside from finding a job after graduation, schools that focus on a liberal arts-based curriculum, like Fredonia, tend to only offer or focus heavily on undergraduate programs whereas larger, research-based universities focus more on research and graduate students. That is not what I'm looking for in my first 4 years of college. I'm looking for a college that revolves around the undergraduate student experience, both inside and outside of the classroom. Also, liberal arts colleges usually have smaller student populations. This means that they tend to give off a very homey feeling. Since there are so few people, students really get to know and spend a lot of time with other students at their colleges. This also leads to smaller classroom sizes, which means that students like myself will get more opportunities to participate in classroom discussions. Students really get to know their professors and their classmates, and professors won't see students as just a face in the crowd or a name on a list. They'll also be able to more easily notice when a student is struggling and provide the necessary help they need. Also, personally, I'm someone that needs outside pressure to do well, so knowing that if I don't show up for class, my professors and classmates will pretty much

immediately notice, will give me that added incentive/pressure to go to class and do well.

Speaking of professors, access to them at a liberal arts college is much easier than at research-based universities. Professors will get the chance to spend quality time with their students, getting to know them, and evaluating them on their progress. Compare that to professors at research-based universities, who might be too caught up in their own research to notice that a student is struggling or find time after class to answer their student's questions. This is exactly the type of education I want, being able to have a professor as a mentor, instead of just a teacher, is game-changing in my opinion.

I could go on and on about the benefits of a liberal arts education, but for this last part, I'd like to give my overall view on the debate. The very foundation of a liberal arts education is learning that life's tough questions don't have easy answers, and that's exactly the case here. It isn't a black and white matter, but rather, somewhere in between. There are pros and cons on both sides, and I believe that to really optimize one's college experience, one will have to come to a compromise. Take, for instance, the argument of finding a job after graduation; liberal arts graduates are notorious for not being able to find good work in their related field after graduation, however, a solution to this could be to think outside the box. In my opinion, liberal arts graduates should be flexible and creative when exploring the job market. Too often, graduates think too narrowly about the application of their degree in the workforce and thus leading to lower pay

and higher competition. An example would be an English major trying desperately to break into publishing. However, if that same English major was to explore different industries and organizations, acquiring a wide array of skills, contacts, and experiences along the way, then come hell or high water they'll be able to find a way to merge all of their areas of interests and strengths into a more compelling and fulfilling career. Personally, I could never see myself working just one job, or in one industry, for the rest of my life. People grow, interests change, so equipping myself with a degree that has a fixed skillset sounds less compelling than a degree with skills I can implement in multiple different ways.

In summation, I believe that there are boons to all types of education systems, some more appealing than others, but for me personally, a liberal arts-based education aligns with a lot of the core values that I believe in. The advantages of said degree outweigh the disadvantages that come with it, in my honest opinion. It can, and will, set me up to do great things, both academically, and career-wise. The only thing that I'm concerned about now is having to break the news to my dad that I won't be a doctor or a lawyer. Fingers crossed he'll still be proud of me.