

Specialization in undergraduates



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Brady Brajavich Specialization: does it belong in higher education? Some say yes, because it creates much more intelligent individuals in their respective fields. Others say no, because without the liberal arts, individuals will lack the necessary skills to succeed in today's work environment. Both sides have well supported arguments, and often when one begins to think they've made a decision on which they agree with, they are swayed the other way. After reading, "Should Undergraduates Specialize?" by Patrick Allitt, and, "Liberal Arts: A Practical View." by Mark Jackson, I have formed my opinion and what I feel like is a suitable answer to the question above. I believe that students should have a choice. If they feel like they're ready to dive into what they know they want to do, let them. But if the student feels like they aren't one hundred percent sure, they should be able to take a wide variety of courses that allow them to eventually choose a major to specialize. Patrick Allitt is the author of the essay, "Should Undergraduates Specialize?" In this essay he compares and contrasts his own experiences in college with those of his college-bound daughter.

By comparing the two, he provides evidence to his belief that having the option to specialize as an undergraduate will benefit students. This is shown in his conclusion, "Students with the right frame of mind thrive on studying diverse subjects until they're ready, sometimes at age twenty or older, to make a stronger commitment. But let's get rid of the idea that liberal arts is for everyone. America's commitment to equality and to universal education is noble and invigorating. But it shouldn't mean that one size fits all" (Allitt 7).

Here Patrick is summarizing his essay, and essentially says that liberal arts may benefit some students, but there is a certain percentage that would

prefer to get busy with their major and specialize. Mark Jackson, a graduate from the University of Cincinnati, thinks that all students should take some liberal arts courses to supplement their professional education, but not because they are forced to, but because they want to. Jackson wrote his essay on why he thinks students, “...question the reasoning behind a liberal arts education” (Jackson 233).

Jackson stands behind the belief that educating students on why a liberal arts education is important is just as vital as actually teaching them the liberal arts. He says that, “ If educators really want to increase the number of liberal arts courses that each student takes, they must first increase the popularity of such studies” (235). In other words, no student wants to take a class that they don’t see a point for taking. He backs his statements up by using personal experiences. Jackson explains how he had an argument with his high school counselor because he didn’t want to take a third year of Spanish. I was an A student in Spanish II, but I hated every minute of the class... I told him that I took two years of a foreign language so that I would be accepted to college, but that I did not want to take a third year” (234). In response to his argument, his counselor would reply that he needed to be a “ well-rounded student”, which is exactly why Jackson is so adamant in his reasoning. In relation to that response, Jackson wraps up the essay by saying, “ It is difficult to persuade some college students that becoming a better person is an important goal of higher education.

Many students want a college education so that they can make more money and have more power” (235). To finish, he reiterates his point; if students don’t see a point in the taking the course, they won’t want to sign

up for it. In the two preceding essays, the two authors give their arguments on where they think specialization belongs in the education system. Allitt states that having a choice on whether or not to specialize as an undergraduate, and not deal with the liberal arts can be a benefit to students.

Jackson believes that students should want to take liberal arts courses, and that if educators want students to do so, they have to do a better job of explaining why they are important and making the courses more attractive. A point of common ground for the two authors, based on the previous statements, is that specialization is important. Without it students will be at a disadvantage. There isn't an exact point of disagreement between Allit and Jackson. They both outline the pros and cons throughout their essays. That being said, there are differences.

Allit is more in favor of specialization, " The early specialization...enabled us to learn one discipline really well, to become far more deeply engaged with it than was possible for our American counterparts" (Allitt 6), but at the same time, understands why a liberal education can be beneficial, " Its (specialization) great and equal drawback was that it forced some students to choose too soon, before they were ready" (6). Jackson thinks that students should want to take liberal courses to complement their vocational studies. Towards the end of his essay, Jackson says that, " Students who want to make the most of their college years should pursue a major course of study while choosing electives or a few minor courses of study from the liberal arts" (Jackson 235). I believe that students should have an option to specialize. Being able to dive right in as an undergrad can be hugely beneficial, and

allow a student to separate themselves from the rest of the competition. The liberal arts can do the same thing. Specializing brings depth of knowledge and a different, higher level of understanding, while the liberal arts allow students to increase the width of their knowledge. The irony of the emphasis being placed on careers is that nothing is more valuable for anyone who has had a professional or vocational education than to be able to deal with abstractions or complexities, or to feel comfortable with subtleties of thought or language, or to think sequentially” (Cousins 31). Jackson used this quote in his essay and I absolutely love it. If I had to back up my opinion with any one statement, this would be it. Vocational education is useless without being able to think abstractly and think on the go, while being able to think abstractly and on the go is useless without a vocational education.

Personally, I'd take Jackson's advice: go right into professional studies, but take classes I felt would make me a more attractive hire. I say that because the reason why I'm in college is so I can get a good-paying job to support myself and one day a family. In order for me to do that, I'm going to have to do all I can to distinguish myself from the group. The university has the intention to do that, but it's damn near impossible for them to know what is best for each individual student. All of my academic career, I've been told that I was being prepared for college, and I was, but now I want to put those tools into practice.

Being told what classes to take, and what classes will make me a better student isn't letting me use what I've learned, and is suppressing my ability to make my own decisions. In essence, we're big kids now. We should have to and want to make the big kid decision on whether or not taking a GEO 106

class will benefit us. Guidance is always welcome, and without the help and suggestions from our advisors we'd be lost, especially as freshman, but that doesn't mean I should have to take a class that won't help me achieve my life goals. But some students don't have the know-how or motivation to take necessary liberal classes, so the university has to force students to take them. " My roommate made this point to me while we were talking about my essay, and I imagine there are many others that feel the same way. My response is this, if a student has yet to take responsibility of his or her own academic career, are they really deserving of a degree? If they can't make their own decisions on something as simple as which supplementary classes to take, how are they going to function once they hit the real world?

Or rather when the real world hits them? Another fantastic argument brought to my attention was: how are students that choose to not specialize right off the bat going to keep up with the ones that do? At this point in every student's life, we need to stop thinking of us as a whole. We are individuals, and just because Rafiki doesn't know what to do with his life doesn't mean the rest of us should suffer. I firmly believe that college marks the beginning of adulthood and the toned-down real world, which means that we all as students need to take more responsibility for our own lives.

Specialization: does it belong in higher education? I say yes... as long as it is balanced with proper liberal courses. Specialization can give a student essential skills and an intense education that can help them get the edge on someone else competing for the same job, and the liberal arts only increases one's attractiveness. For all those naysayers out there, I just ask

you respect what I have to say, to take my views into consideration, and, as the noble Andre 3000 once said, " Lend me some suga. I am your neighbor. "