

Guest editorial by Thomas C. Pleger: A liberal arts education will prepare you for future

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We've all heard the news about mass layoffs, unemployment and economic uncertainty, and whether you're far along in your career or just starting out, it's scary.

Many people are reevaluating their career plans and questioning what the future holds in terms of job possibilities.

As a campus dean and professor, parents often ask me what their son or daughter should study in order to prepare for the future job market.

Often parents and potential college students are trying to predict what the "hot" majors or fields will be. But my response is a stand-by field of study that has served me and generations of people in every imaginable career field: Liberal arts.

Usually, I get a puzzled look from these parents, followed by a question like, "What can a liberal arts major do?"

The answer is: Anything and everything. The term liberal arts refers to a broad type of education that includes natural and social sciences, the arts, the humanities, and interdisciplinary studies.

The liberal arts curriculum is the foundation for virtually every major offered in the University of Wisconsin System, and is designed to develop critical thinking skills, problem solving, communication skills, empathy, an understanding and appreciation for the arts and the human condition, and the ability to find and understand information.

In essence, the liberal arts education is about learning how to learn. It provides students with skills that transcend any job or career. This is the most versatile and useful type of higher education available today. It is also what employers, both locally and in this increasingly global economy, look for in employees.

Employers want people who can problem solve, learn in new environments, work with a variety of people, and find, understand, and apply information. In short, liberal arts graduates are ready for the current job environment, and they're ready for the future.

It is hard to predict where the highest demand jobs will be, but liberal arts graduates continue to be in very high demand. They are the ones who become leaders, managers, and forward thinkers in their communities and workplace.

Not all higher ed schools offer this type of education. Some specialize in technical or vocational training, while others focus on a very narrow field of study. However, all University of Wisconsin institutions offer a liberal arts curriculum that is taught by professors who specialize in this type of education. Regardless of what major a student is interested in at a UW campus, they must take a core of liberal arts or general education during their first two years, laying the foundational skills that are necessary to succeed in college and in life.

I often use my own educational experience as an example of the types of skills that are the most useful for a productive career. I'm UW System-educated and hold a BS in political science with a minor in anthropology, a master's in anthropology and a Ph.D. in anthropology and archaeology.

But of all the training I've received, it was the liberal arts foundation courses from my first two years

that were the most useful. Those skills have allowed me to become a researcher, a professor and teacher, and now a university administrator. Every day of every one of the positions I have held, I use the critical thinking, problem solving, and communication skills I developed long ago, at the onset of my academic career.

If you are thinking about a university education, I urge you to consider the liberal arts. It will provide you with skills that weather all economic conditions, help you develop a passion for learning, and allow you to pursue a variety of choices in your career and in your life.

For more information on starting a liberal arts education at your local University of Wisconsin campus, visit the UW-Baraboo/Sauk County web site at: www.baraboo.uwc.edu.

Thomas C. Pleger is Campus Executive Officer and Dean at UW-Baraboo/Sauk County.