

An Engineer's Advice: A Discussion about College and the Value of a Liberal Arts Education

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To be honest, my brother has always been the problem child in our family. When I was younger, I wanted to be a doctor one day. The next day, I wanted to be an astrophysicist. My brother wanted to be a garbage truck driver, and then someone who wanted to test out video games. I dreamt about lucrative, successful jobs that would make me someone reputable. He dreamt of what he wanted to do.

Twelve years later, here I am on the brink of graduating with an engineering degree. My brother is entering college next year, and he calls me incessantly. He wants to know what classes he should take, whether he should be an engineer like me, which dorm he should live in. He wants to double major in French and Philosophy. Should he be worried about getting a job after he graduates? Should he major in a field that prepares him for a definitive career instead?

I don't have any concrete advice, so I tell him my story, and then try to tell him something useful, something that is not skewed by my judgment. It feels strange to tell someone that it's all right to do what I have never done:

When I entered college, I was concerned about what I would do after it. How could I strategically plan college so that I wouldn't have to worry about my job prospects? Logically, the answer was to pick a major that had a job title immediately associated with it; so I chose engineering. The security offered by my major has been a driving force behind the fact that I haven't switched majors in the years I've been here.

Most engineering degrees require at least sixteen credits of liberal arts courses, and mine is no exception. These are the courses that I have to take with the diffuse "rest of the university": people who boldly major in art, history, political science, Latin, and so on. One of the first questions I ask when I meet someone who majors in the liberal arts is, "What are you going to do after you graduate?"

The infamous shrug is a surprisingly uncommon answer. Most often, I have been surprised by the ingenuity of the answers I receive: therapy through art, facilitation of international business, changing environmental policy. Clearly, most people here do not lack a sense of direction. They are the people who spend afternoons chalking up the sidewalks down the streets of the college campus, advertising political perspectives and canvassing for the environment. While I pore over problems for my engineering classes, they discuss the state of the world in semi-dark coffee houses. Their majors expose them to current issues and allow them to get into heated debates about public policy. Somehow, their classes seem more relevant, more urgent to the social and political climate. Often, I comfort myself that I will get a job, while they will struggle after they graduate.

I know that I have missed half the point of college just by having that perspective. When I graduate this year, I will not have read Dostoevsky. I will have missed out on Aristotelian philosophy, the cornerstone of Western thinking. The few classes that I have taken in the liberal arts area have stimulated my thinking laterally, unlike an undergraduate engineering education, which is based on a system of building blocks, one on top of the other until the top. I often find myself imagining the person whom I could have been with a more extensive, liberal education: one capable of assessing the political climate in a country, one capable of truly understanding the ramifications of an act of legislature, one capable of appreciating abstraction in art. I'm not saying all engineers aren't capable of these things; I'm just not and wish I had taken the time to educate myself in these areas.

Engineering educations are focused intensely on preparing us for our jobs, and after these there is intense competition among students. Once our GPAs are culled through, we are all the same competitor. Then, somewhat paradoxically, a successful candidate is often defined by characteristics that have nothing to do with engineering: being multilingual, having studied abroad etc. Traits like these are more common among the liberal arts majors, so a major lesson in college for me has been to learn

that smartness in a certain area doesn't necessarily impress people. When recruiters meet with me, they find the fact that I have lived in Dubai a lot more fascinating than the fact that I have an X GPA. They connect with me on a general plane and ask me more about how I handle life than how I solve specific problems. They don't care very much about how I can perform individually, but are more interested in whether I can work well in a team with people from different parts of the world.

So, my point is, even from an engineer's skewed perspective, the importance of a liberal education cannot be overstated. If you want to know the truth about finding a job, I will tell you that it will probably be more difficult to find a job right out of college with a liberal arts major than an engineering one. To me, this was the swinging factor in choosing an engineering undergraduate education. However, it shouldn't have to be the same choice for every person. If you go on to major in the liberal arts, you will be able to expand the number of ways you think, not only what you think. Learning by rote will not be the cornerstone of your education.

I want to emphasize that you will find a job if you are passionate, even if your background is not strictly vocational or pre-professional. The largest part of most college focuses on the liberal arts. Most people in the past who have obtained a liberal education are able to find perfectly suitable jobs. In fact, they are the ones who have a good grounding in all areas, the general go-to people that companies look for when hiring dependable, knowledgeable employees. For generations to come, they are the teachers, policy makers, historians, artists... they are, in short, the people that make life truly interesting on a day-to-day basis.

So, go for it. Major in philosophy (I will probably sneak a look at your textbook). Seek out diverse ways of thinking. Argue. Learn by talking to people and listening to them. Don't accept things passively. Be intrepid, and go boldly into this venture. You may have your doubts, but a liberal arts

education is indeed a foolproof investment, perhaps not in your immediate future, as I said before, but in yourself for the remainder of your life.