

I Chose Well

By Megan Corby

Bachelors Degree In Progress - Chemistry
September 2009 to present
University of Wisconsin- Milwaukee, WI

Bachelors Degree – Women’s Studies
September 2002 to May 2006
University of Wisconsin Madison – Madison, WI

I hereby affirm that this is an original essay and my own work.

I sat next to a woman in my physics lecture. It was the first day of class. We chatted and found out we were both pre-medicine.

“This is my second bachelor’s, my first one is in Women’s Studies,” I said.

“Me too, my first degree is in Art. Didn’t we choose well?” she said and rolled her eyes.

Her sarcasm surprised me. Not only has my degree laid the bedrock for my self-development, it has also propelled me forward with the confidence and skills to gain employment in multiple fields. I have been in multiple administrative positions and have started my own business. I never doubted that my liberal arts degree would prove useful and marketable. Then again, I had an excellent example right at home.

My mother received innumerable benefits from her college education. After earning a Bachelors of Arts degree in English at twenty-seven, she went on to have a plethora of jobs and more than one career. She has been a secretary, a personnel director of a nursing home, an account executive for an insurance company, and the director of Human Resources at a university. She’s been a stay-at-home mom, an art teacher, and a factory worker. In her forties, she built on her liberal arts background by obtaining an education certificate. She worked as an elementary school teacher for ten years. When teaching was no longer an option, she became an administrator at a nutritional supplements company and, finally, the business manager for an integrative medical clinic. Vibrant and full of life, she is now sixty and suspects that this most recent career will not be her last.

Social ability is a vitally important skill in the workplace; specifically, the ability to work with and forge connections with a wide array of people. Liberal arts graduates

are well read, aware of world events, socially conscious, and flexible thinkers. Their education provides the cultural knowledge and foundation necessary for effective communication. As a director of Human Resources at a university, my mom worked with a bevy of employees, including professors, from all disciplines. Being able to discuss Nietzsche with a philosophy professor, or share an appreciation for James Joyce with a literature professor has helped her to connect on a human level with fellow employees. When she had to inform an employee about changes to his or her benefits, they had a platform to build from, a relationship. The employees trusted her to hold their best interests at heart. A broad education provides the backdrop for these relationships. With a diverse knowledge base, it is easy to make connections with many different people. The connections forged and trust built between people is an asset not only in the present, but also towards constructing a strong career.

Unlike my fellow student with the Art degree, I think a broad education allows a person to build bridges between disciplines. Understanding the advance of science and industry requires the ability to comprehend the historical conditions that spurred its progress. Appreciating another person requires realizing the diverse social circumstances that contribute to identity. As a teacher, my mom built from and expanded her liberal arts background. She had experience with every subject she taught and, therefore, was able to teach at a more penetrative level. More importantly, she strived to help students understand each other and the world around them. She was able to communicate to her students that nothing happens in isolation. She could draw connections between current and historical events or link music to mathematics. Constructing bridges between

disciplines creates flexible and critical thinking patterns. My mother was able to impart these skills to her students, instilling a life-long love of learning.

Currently, our economy is recovering from a recession. Many people have been laid off from specialized jobs and have to wait until their field is once again hiring. A liberal arts degree confers the freedom to choose, even in times of crisis. It is unlikely to be stuck in one career with so many diverse skills. My father lost his long-time, well-paying job right before the economy took a downturn. My mom had to leave teaching and find other work in order to make up for the lost income. She began managing a nutritional supplement company where she was in charge of packaging design, marketing, accounts receivable and payable, and customer relations. Having no prior design experience and drawing on her college art classes, she was able to completely redesign the product packaging. She received rave reviews for her work. She had not used her art abilities for twenty years, yet they never truly left her. Like riding a bike, these skills can be recalled when needed and put to work in a novel way. Even in a struggling economy, her liberal arts background proved marketable.

Many workplaces require specialized skills, and the liberal arts student is uniquely prepared to zero in on the resources and preparation necessary to meet these specialized and changing demands. When my mother went to school, computers were not a part of the curriculum, yet with a solid foundation she has been able to remain current with technological advances. Her most recent career, as a practice manager of a medical clinic, required that she attain extensive knowledge of Web-based marketing, Web site design, and hosting streaming Internet seminars. Despite her lack of formal experience with computers, she had the ability to search out, learn, and implement the necessary skills in

an independent manner. She did research at the library and signed up for classes at the community college. A liberal arts degree confers the quantitative and information literacy required to seek out resources, understand them, and to learn independently. Although it seems counterintuitive, a generalist is exceptionally suited to acquire and execute the newest skills demanded of employees.

As someone whose responsibilities now include the hiring at a medical clinic, my mom has a few things she looks for when choosing new employees. Good resumes are a dime a dozen and a few things make one stand out in an interview. It's no surprise that social skills are at the top of the list. She says that medical professionals, no matter how clinically skilled, must connect with the people they are treating to help them feel comfortable. She also looks for the ability to think creatively and to be flexible. Front desk and administrative staff encounter a wide assortment of billing statements, medical reports, and confidential correspondence. They need to be able to interpret each new item uniquely and process it appropriately. My mom believes a liberal arts background is a more precise indicator of success than a specialized degree - and she knows this from experience.

Throughout my life, my mother has remained a role model and mentor. She understands that a career is not something most people are handed straight out of college; it is something built over time. Creative and flexible thinking, social skills, cultural intelligence and, most importantly, the ability and confidence to learn new skills all play integral roles in career development. I have witnessed how my mother's liberal arts education has given her the freedom to create a unique path. Seeing her accomplishments

and equipped with the knowledge from my own liberal arts background, I can succeed at any career (or careers!) I choose.

