**On Choosing a "Useless" Major**

By Miles Raymer

*What are you going to do with that?*

This question, one that I have sought to answer countless times with varying success, is a hallmark of the college experience for any modern student who decides to major in a range of fields considered by many to be "useless." These "useless" majors tend to huddle together in the mildewing halls of our nation's humanities departments, but are not necessarily restricted to such dank havens. The label, most commonly touted by people comfortably assured of their embeddedness in "useful" vocational tracks, has become so rampant that the content (or lack thereof) to which it refers is nebulous at best. Due to my general skepticism about the fruitfulness of any attempt to locate any consistent definition for "useful" and "useless" majors, it's enough to say that inquiries of the aforementioned ilk can almost always be translated into veiled attempts to remind us that, after all, pecuniary matters are the dominant motivating force in modern education. How, sir or madam, can you possibly justify spending so much time and money on a decidedly avocational pastime when your prime directive is to acquire the requisite skills for a white-collar vocation? As someone who decided to switch my major from pre-journalism to philosophy after just a few weeks into my first term at the University of Oregon, I will try to use my experiences and the benefits of hindsight to proffer an answer to this question.

**Passion vs. Practicality**

Picture this: a university freshman arrives on campus with a well-developed sense of his or her aptitudes, weaknesses, and interests. Upon diving into a term or two of carefully chosen curricula, the student identifies and begins to pursue a major that incites passion and promises a bright future. Anyone reading this can instantly conjure a shortlist of acceptable choices: biochemistry, computer science, engineering, etc. After four years of hard work, summer internships, and commendable fiscal responsibility, the student graduates and takes a job in his or her chosen profession. The job proves stimulating and challenging, but still leaves enough time for the cultivation of hobbies, friendships, romantic attachments, and family.

It's a nice story, and one that proved true for many in our parents' generation who were fortunate enough to attend a university. However, this narrative, which received just enough vindication to earn itself a place in the educational creation myth for an entire generation of students, has ultimately turned out to be spurious and almost entirely unattainable for that same generation. In just a handful of decades, the world changed radically in ways that are forcing young people to rethink our approach to higher education. These days, an undergraduate degree in one or more of even the most "useful" majors offers no guarantee of employment in a desired field, nor of what used to be considered basic job security and health benefits for college educated individuals. Concurrent with these developments is the skyrocketing price of college tuition. Do these facts mean that attending a traditional university is no longer a wise decision for a young, ambitious, and talented person? Perhaps, but since this is a blog for folks already committed to the idea of attending college, I will assume that you have weighed the evidence and made a reasonable determination that accords with your particular situation.

Proceeding from this assumption, the likelihood that you will, at some point in your college experience, face a decision between studying something you are passionate about and something that fails to move you but feels like a more practical choice, is very high. If you are a thoughtful person with a broad range of interests, the chance is even higher. Though it's impossible to speculate about the particulars of any individual case, every person dealing with this issue ought to ask him or herself this question: *Is it a false dilemma to choose between my passion and a practical course of study?* In other words, is it *actually the case* that passion and practicality cannot harmoniously coexist when it comes to choosing a major (or majors)? The idealist in me wants to say that, in the final analysis, everyone will answer this question in the negative. However, for some, there will be a genuine conflict between passion and practicality that will demand sacrifice or undesired compromise. If this is the case, can I make the case that you should choose your passion over something more likely to pay the bills?

Maybe. But before I attempt to do so, I need to offer a quick caveat: The unfortunate reality is that students from different socioeconomic strata do (and, in fact, must) approach this problem in functionally distinct ways. Those privileged to come from a background that allows for or encourages the pursuit of passion over practicality will have a much easier time resolving this matter than those for whom education is the first rung on the long, increasingly slippery ladder to a better life. In the interest of full disclosure, I identify as a member of the former group; although I have made many efforts to consider the circumstances and stories of those with dissimilar backgrounds, my experience in these matters is undoubtedly biased by the privileged status into which I was born. However, if you've come with me this far, I hope you will continue to hear me out.

**The Case for Passion**

We are growing up in a time of change, one in which our dollar-saturated brains are struggling to come to terms with an economic model that has proven ecologically destructive and unsustainable but has yet to be supplanted by a model that supports human flourishing and equality for all living communities (human and otherwise). Dave Hensen, an old family friend, activist, and one of the founding members of the Occidental Arts and Ecology Center, recently told me that although we no longer have a choice about whether or not we will undergo global transition, we do have a choice about whether or not it will be a *just* transition, one in which the gap between the haves and have nots does not continue to widen, and in which people gain the graceful obstinacy to insist that, this time, the human community progresses with everyone together or not at all. If you agree that we are living in such a moment in time and that this kind of choice lies before all of us, then I believe you will take the following question seriously: *What do I need to play my part in a just transition?*

I assert that this question offers a host of criteria that are far superior to that of an economically-driven approach when the time comes to choose what you will study. In this era of volatile markets and shifting fiscal currents, those who spend their lives learning the ropes of an outdated system will profit only in the short run, and will prove less adaptable than those who cultivate a self-directed lifestyle that accords with human zeal and mutable intelligence. A just transition requires all the technology and science we can muster, but it will also demand the compassion and complex understanding that have been the great gifts of a diverse academy that gives credence to myriad scholarly endeavors. A just transition also necessitates a new generation of artists, those dedicated to the enrichment of experience at all levels of biological organization. If your passions lead you in such a direction, and if your life won't instantly fall apart if you decide to major in Medieval Studies, then it's my opinion that not only do you need to follow the impulse to do what you love, but that your fellow living creatures need it too.