**On Choosing a "Useless" Major––2nd Draft**

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 consistent definitions 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. It's not important which department or field the student chooses, because anyone with a college degree has a great shot at doing well in the job market. 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. Even newly-minted STEM majors (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics), who purportedly have a better shot at obtaining success than anyone else, are not exempt from accelerating degree inflation. 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. And while there exist plenty of circumstances where the choice between passion and practicality can be revealed as a false dilemma, many students face a genuine trade-off in deciding where to invest the majority of their academic energy. Should you find yourself in this predicament, whatever course of action you choose will undoubtedly make a big difference for your future.

**An Anecdotal Offering**

Since I find it difficult to make general assertions about this process that will be relevant to every particular situation, I'd like to offer a brief recounting of my personal experiences, which I hope will mirror your own in some useful way. But before I attempt to do so, 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 efforts to consider the circumstances and stories of those with dissimilar backgrounds, my experience choosing a "useless" major is undoubtedly biased by the privileged status into which I was born. If there is a valid argument to convince those from less privileged conditions to prioritize their passions over more practical matters, it is not my place to make it.

As is the case with many humanities majors, my story begins with an inspirational professor. Professor Mark Johnson, a gangly man who always wore a tie and loved to introduce philosophers by digging up the least flattering picture available, exuded a sense of mindfulness and candor I'd never encountered before. He seduced me with far greater intensity and alacrity than any girl I met in the dorms. Quite simply, sitting in Professor Johnson's class felt like coming home. After just four weeks in his "Philosophical Problems" survey course, I knew I wanted to change my major. I was wary of the "impractical" nature of this impulse, but a graduate student named Mat Foust soon persuaded me to follow my instincts. As the leader of my discussion section for Johnson's course, it was he who, upon overhearing me express a desire to change my major, pounced with the cunning mélange of zeal and prudence wielded by those who doggedly pursue their intellectual passions above all else. Foust, now a dear friend and mentor, quickly revealed himself as the kind of influential teacher without whom I would be unable to tell my life's story.

After switching majors, I began the long process of immersing myself in any course that sounded intriguing: Asian Philosophy, Metaphysics, Philosophy of Film, Existentialism, etc. Slowly, under the guidance of generous and patient instructors, I developed a passionate interest in ethics. The more I studied, the more I discovered just how much I needed to learn! I began to see myself as the site of an ongoing exchange between the various behaviors and value systems permeating my environment. Little by little, I realized that my habits of perception as well as my general conduct were undergoing a profound transformation. This transformation, though fueled by a tradition infamous for extreme abstraction, proved more than merely academic. It surged into my personal life, enriching my friendships and providing a new glimmer of hope for my long-neglected relationship with my sister. It enhanced my participation in seemingly unrelated activities, such as singing in choir and playing ultimate frisbee. Most profoundly, philosophy reorganized and deepened my understanding of worlds beyond my immediate grasp, revoking my license to see myself as anything other than a highly structured splash of DNA and saline whose well being was inextricably tied to that of other humans, and also to other biological communities and physical processes.

When it came time to leave school, philosophy went with me, shedding light at every turn. It was there in the classrooms where I struggled to find my place as a new teacher. It was there when I fell in love and started planning my life for two people instead of just one. It was there when I traveled to Japan for a year to live and work in Japanese schools. And it was there when I decided that teaching didn't work for me and that it was time to go home and try something new. Far beyond opening the door to future job prospects, majoring in philosophy helped me construct a *way of life*, one without which my experience could never be as rewarding or challenging. It's not that I can't imagine having a perfectly decent life as a journalist, or scientist, or computer programmer, or one of a thousand different fascinating and worthy professions; it's that I'd never want to, because philosophy isn't just what I chose to study––*it's who I am*.

**The Case for Passion**

Although I hope it may be useful to hear the story of someone who flourished by choosing a "useless" major, I don't think my experiences alone should be enough to convince anyone to choose passion over practicality, should the need to make such a decision arise. So let me also make a more general argument for why I think majoring in something that incites passion isn't just a matter of personal fulfillment, but also of cultivating and sustaining the health of the global community.

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 a massive 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.