The Value of a Liberal Arts Degree in a STEM-Centered World

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Introduction

College has existed for hundreds of years in the United States, starting with the founding of Harvard and a few other originally religious schools (Thelin University). However, as with everything else, college got more complex as time passed. New colleges were created, colleges changed to focus on higher education instead of ordaining priests, more and more majors were added, sports were introduced, and as technology and culture began to shift into the modern-day, a new branch of higher education emerged: Science Technology, Engineering, and Math, also known as STEM.

Of course, however as with everything else, the popular opinion on this matter has changed. In the 1960s and 1970s, when the Baby Boomer generation began going to college, those who could afford it would be told to "follow their dreams" and to "pursue whatever degree they want" and so they did (Waechter). This resulted in many people having liberal arts degrees because they were not only accepted but encouraged by society. Recently, however, times have changed. STEM degrees are on the rise due to the argument that those majors will lead to a successful career, while liberal arts degrees are oftentimes overlooked or not pursued (Strauss).

Within the past few years, the opinions on STEM and liberal arts degrees have begun to change, which has caused some heated debates on the topic regarding different college degrees and their usefulness. As Generation Z becomes college-aged, this topic, as well as being educated on colleges in general, is becoming more important. These young people need to be educated concerning the matter of college degrees, especially concerning the topic of STEM degrees versus liberal arts degrees. They need to know what each degree means and what

opportunities that each degree can hold, and the jobs each degree can offer in their future. They need to know this because the path they choose now will dictate their entire future, and it will affect them for the rest of their life. This poses the question: is getting a liberal arts degree worth paying for, or does it fail to compete with the STEM degrees? Or is it simply a waste of time money, and a college education that won't lead to a viable and/or profitable career. Unfortunately, most people who are of college-age do not look into these topics, nor do they try to answer any of these questions for themselves, until it is too late, and they make their college decisions based off of, most likely, their family's opinions, and people who have not been to college or have not gone job searching for quite some time. And those opinions tend to stray people of generation Z from getting a liberal arts degree, or even going to a liberal arts college at all, and instead pressures them to pursue STEM degrees, even if they are not passionate about the degree they choose. If these people looked into and did research into the topic of college degrees, they would find that liberal arts degrees are more viable and useful for their future than they know. If they research this topic, they would find that liberal Arts degrees are as useful as STEM degrees because they provide job opportunities, teach people how to live in the real world, and they can help people grow, mature, and truly discover who they are as a person.

Reasons for my interest

When I first began doing research for this paper, I began in what seems like an unlikely place. The book *On Writing* by Stephen King. This book is a half autobiography and half "instruction manual" on how to become a successful writer in the modern-day. The second half of the book is what pertains to the topic of this essay. In it, he discusses the topic of writing classes and going to college to specifically get a degree in writing, which would be considered a

liberal arts degree. He states that he himself has never taken any writing classes, but he had friends who were writers who did take writer's classes. He said, “I'm often asked if I think the beginning writer of fiction can benefit from writing classes or seminars… as for myself, I’m doubtful about writing classes, but I am not entirely against them” (231). While this may seem like a negative comment at first glance, when it is given context from the rest of the book, it actually has a good connotation. He is critical of writing classes/degrees, and he points out that they have flaws, because, as he says “what does not?” But he also says what is good about them. “Writing classes and seminars do offer at least one undeniable benefit: in them, the desire to write fiction and poetry is taken seriously” (King, 235). This means that from his perspective, liberal arts degrees and the classes associated with them, especially in writing and English, do have use and benefits.

The topic of Liberal Arts versus STEM degrees has always been a topic of interest for me because I am interested in pursuing a creative writing degree, and this decision has sparked a lot of controversies concerning the people in my life. Many of them, mostly my friends, are in full support of this decision, and they think it will lead to a good future. However, others, mostly my relatives, think that even going to a liberal arts college is a waste of time and money and that there is no way that I could get any well-paying, successful job from it. After doing plenty of research and mulling over everything that I discovered, I decided that I was going to argue that Liberal Arts degrees do have a use, and they can least one to have a successful and happy life. I also believe that college is one of the most important things in a student’s life, as it has a significant impact on their future.

Background

The history of college and higher education actually started simply, with the construction of Harvard in 1636. “After the founding of Harvard and into the early 1800s, several colleges were founded. These colleges, like Harvard, were small, religiously affiliated institutions” (Jacob). However, after the revolutionary war, this began to change. “Colleges began to broaden their focus to include education for the ministry, medicine, and law” (University). This allowed for doctors and lawyers to become college-educated, so they could provide better services and potentially save more lives.

It was after the early 1800s that the curriculum and purposes of college began to be challenged; people were beginning to believe that colleges should teach more than ministers, lawyers, and doctors (Thelin). They believed that colleges should start teaching the common man: “[i]n the nineteenth century, the mission of higher education changed radically to include “practical subjects” like agriculture and engineering” (University). It was also in this era that America as a country began to fully establish itself, and the government became closer to what it is today. During this time, the federal government, concerned of giving itself too much power, gave the state governments control over the universities within their state. “Wary of centralized power, Americans maintained educational control close to home. Therefore, governance of colonial colleges became almost exclusively the jurisdiction of local and state governments” (Thelin). It was also during this time that the reputation of colleges began to climb, which lead to more colleges being built in what became known as "The college building boom" (Thelin). In the “college building boom,” over two hundred colleges were built all across the nation. However, colleges were run differently back then, and many of them ended up closing due to a lack of

funds. “[S]ince most of these new colleges depended on student tuition payments and local donors, there was also a high closure rate and the schools that did survive typically struggled from year to year” (Thelin). This proves that even though the purposes and attendees of colleges were changing, college still wasn't all that commonplace in today's society.

Originally, all colleges began as liberal arts institutes; while they taught doctors and lawyers, they also taught English, history, and many programs in the arts such as theatre and music (Jacob). However, industry, science, and technology were slowly becoming more prevalent in society, and people began to believe that college should reflect that, instead of merely teaching ministers, lawyers, doctors, and people pursuing the arts. This sparked heavy debates surrounding the purpose of college, ending in what became known as “The Yale report of 1828” (Jacob). "The Yale Report of 1828" called for breadth in the curriculum as the writers of the document doubted "whether the powers of the mind can be developed, in their fairest proportions, by studying languages alone, or mathematics alone, or natural or political science alone" (Jacob). This started the call for college majors, educating people in many different areas to help them become an expert in the field they plan to pursue. “[While] the classical languages and liberal studies of the bachelor of arts degree remained central to the character of American higher education in this era, several new fields gained a foothold informal study. Engineering and science acquired a presence on the campus. Professional education for law and medicine usually also took place though in separate institutions” (Thelin). It was this moment and these demands that began the slow but sure cultural shift into the modern-day STEM driven world.

In the mid to late 1800s, life and culture began to shift even more. More technology was invented, and societal changes called for more jobs that needed a higher level of education than

what was offered at a normal education level. People who worked in technology, scientific fields, agriculture, and engineering. All of these fields were slowly requiring more and more expertise, which led to people demanding that higher education provide a program to teach them to be “experts” in their selected fields. However, colleges simply didn't offer those things or those classes, because they were all strictly liberal arts colleges. But the demand for these new courses and classes to be offered in a college was persistent, and eventually, these demands were met. “In addition to the conspicuous church-related liberal arts colleges, various groups founded a range of other special interest institutions for advanced study. These included agricultural colleges, proprietary medical schools, freestanding law schools, engineering schools, and scientific colleges.” (Thelin). This lead to some of the most well known and iconic colleges such as the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (Jacob).

Throughout all of this change and shifts within the college systems, colleges still weren't very integrated into society just yet. Not many people went to college during the 1700s and the early to mid-1800s. This was partially due to the education that colleges offered, which did not fit a lot of careers and jobs that existed during these times. Another factor that contributed to this was the financial cost of college. College was expensive even for those times, and not many people who weren't in the upper class could afford college, especially since financial aid was sparse or nonexistent during these times, this was mainly due to colleges having few benefactors and attendees (Thelin). However, as America shifted into the 1900s, this attitude towards college began to shift (University). “Between 1870 and 1910 nearly all institutions of higher education enjoyed a surge in appeal both to prospective students and to benefactors” (Thelin). This era became known as “The Age of University”, in which colleges saw attendance begin to

skyrocket. This also led to benefactors and investors seeing the potential in universities, and they began to invest in the larger universities they began to see as profitable.

It was also during this time that many of the well known “elite” universities were founded, including Johns Hopkins, Yale, Princeton, Stanford, just to name a few (Thelin). Also in this era, the Association of American Universities was founded. “It’s charter members included Johns Hopkins, Columbia, Harvard, Cornell, Yale, Clark, Catholic University, Princeton, Stanford, and the Universities of Chicago, Pennsylvania, California, Michigan, and Wisconsin… Brown, Northwestern, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and Vanderbilt.” (Thelin). This later became known as the Ivy League, a group of pristine colleges that are difficult to get into. Degrees from these esteemed colleges are sought after by many, as they can open many doors for someone years down the road.

Up until this point in history, college attendees were mostly white males, with the occasional white woman attending, though women only came to learn to become a teacher, and no black person, man or woman, went to college until 1837, when the first African American university was constructed, with the exception of a few outliers (Library). An example of these outliers is Alexander Lucius Twilight, who was the first-ever recorded African American man to graduate from a university--Middlebury College in 1823 (Library). However, this university was not able to grant its students degrees until 1932 (Titcomb). For women, aside from a small number, not many women went to college until the 1800s (Lewis). Afterward, many women started going into college, and many universities were created only for women, but they were mostly taught education, only a few went into engineering, law, or medicine (Lewis). Obviously, this is a stark contrast to today, where more women than men are going to college, with 51% of

all university students being female, and there's been a huge jump in the numbers of African Americans into college (Titcomb).

Another big change in colleges today is the number of both STEM majors given at colleges and the number of STEM degrees that are being pursued (Wright). In fact, between 2010 and 2016, STEM degrees have risen from 388,000 STEM degrees given to 550,000, which is a 43% growth in the span of six years alone (Wright). With this massive growth in STEM degrees given out and a large number of jobs which require a STEM degree, surely the old dependence and use of a liberal arts degree, which was so common in the early days of higher education, is all but gone, and the only way to a profitable career is to obtain a STEM degree, right? Wrong. Even today, with the rise and prevalence in the STEM fields, a liberal arts degree still holds weight in today's society, and it can lead to a profitable career that those who pursue them actually enjoy.

Argument

To better understand how a liberal arts degree can lead to a successful career, one must understand what a liberal arts degree offers. While each specific major, whether it be art, a foreign language, gender and sexuality studies, English, philosophy, and the many other liberal arts degrees will teach their own specific skills, they all teach the same basic “soft skills” as well. A few examples of these “soft skills” are “Communication, observation, empathy, and logical thinking” (Moro). They also teach things such as regulating one’s own emotions, critical thinking, and understanding other people's points of view (Hume). These soft skills allow for humanities students to grow and mature as people, discover themselves and learn how to understand other people, regardless of the differences they may share. They also teach students

how to understand and sympathize with others, and truly understand how others think and feel. These skills are criticized and are part of the argument that humanities degrees are useless, and that employers do not look for people with liberal arts degrees because they only know soft skills that any functioning adult can learn. While this argument is technically true, these skills are not all a liberal arts education teaches.

A common criticism of the humanities is that it doesn't teach any “hard skills” that are mostly affiliated with STEM degrees, and thus students with liberal arts degrees don't know anything about science, math, or any of those “hard skills” that supposedly every employer looks for. “If the department only discusses the great instruction in cognitive ability, critical thinking skills, writing, and analysis and is without reference to any hard skills like running a computer, keeping the books, or designing a satellite; it is probably a worthless major.” (Waechter) But in actuality, students who get humanities degrees do know a thing or two about “hard skills”. ¨Typically, a liberal arts education involves the study of the natural sciences (including mathematics), the social sciences, and the humanities. (The natural sciences and math are frequently associated with STEM — science, technology, engineering, mathematics — and not considered to be part of a liberal education, even though they are.)” (Strauss) In fact, every major, whether it's STEM, liberal arts, or otherwise, will teach their students these hard skills, even if it is not that majors’ main focus. “A typical college curriculum requires students to sample fields in each subject.” (Strauss) This means that every student, regardless of major, comes out of college well rounded and with some knowledge of “hard skills.”

In order to prove that liberal arts degrees do indeed have value in today's society, there needs to be examples of people whose liberal arts degrees gave them a successful career and not

just those one in a million examples, like celebrities or CEOs. in the course of my research, I came across several examples of people who have liberal arts degrees and have successful careers. I chose to interview two of those people and ask them about their lives post-college, and their career journey. These two people are Mackenzie Staub and James Williamson.

Mackenzie Staub has a Bachelor's degree in interior design from Virginia Commonwealth University. After graduation, she entered an entry-level recruiting job through a friend of hers. Over the years she'd been "referred to every company I've worked for since." She went from job to job, never really loving anything she was doing. Eventually, she was referred to a job at Facebook to be a part of their Data Center Recruiting Team. Now she loves her job and she gets paid "140-170k per year." Mackenzie came fresh out of college and got a job, then over the years, she found a job that she truly loves and that pays a six-figure salary. Her liberal arts degree ended up giving her a career that she loves and that is more than profitable.

To ensure that this was not just a fluke or yet another one in a million chance, I found another person whose liberal arts degree gave them a job they love, and that pays well. That person is James Williamson, who has a Bachelor's degree in art from the University of South Carolina. Once he was out of college, he took jobs in graphic design, working for many companies over the years, including Discovery Place in Charlotte. In that job, and in others since, he was a graphic designer, making posters, banners, and the like for whichever company he worked for. Eventually, he was offered a job at Lynda.com, making tutorial videos for people who wanted to learn more about the world of web and graphic design. He went all over the country to speak to large groups about web/graphic design. Not only does he love his job, but it

pays 135k a year. This is yet another person whose liberal arts degree who has a job that they love, and a job that pays well.

Action Plan

Now there are two ways that this can end. This information is put out there, and then nothing happens. Nothing changes and the world keeps spinning and turning as it always has. Or, I could take the information I've learned in my research and try to do something with it. Maybe change some people's minds about college degrees and what they could mean/provide for their or their loved one's future. I want to create a presentation and present it to both students and parents. This presentation will explain what a liberal arts education entails, and the pros and cons that come with that education. I will also talk about career opportunities that a liberal arts degree offers, and I will compare that to a STEM degree, what's its education entails, and what jobs it offers. While in a lot of cases the STEM degree is statistically better, it's not by much, and this presentation is created to prove that.

Not only do I want to present this information to high schoolers, but I also want to present to the parents of these high schoolers. Plenty of high schoolers have a desire to go to an art school or pursue a liberal arts education, but it's their parents who discourage them from pursuing those passions and those degrees. I thought that perhaps if the parents truly knew what a liberal arts degree taught, and the opportunities that it could provide for their child in the future, that maybe they'd be more willing to allow for their child to pursue the education, degree, and job that they are passionate about.

Hopefully, it will convince some students that the career and degree in the arts that they want will actually land them a job and that it's not a lost cause or not worth it. I also hope that

this presentation will change the minds of some adults/parents and that it will make them realize that a liberal arts degree isn't useless or a waste of money, but that it could actually help their child succeed and get them a job that they actually love.

Conclusion

In my research, I've discovered that a liberal arts degree can offer more than I initially thought. Not only does it teach soft skills that are often associated with the humanities, but it also teaches some hard skills, even if it isn't the educations main focus. I also learned that there are plenty of employers and companies look for people who have liberal arts degrees because of what those degrees teach their students. I've also discovered the flaws that come with a liberal arts degree, and how it may not be as good as a STEM degree. But for those who want it chase their dreams in the humanities, and who aren't afraid to put themselves out there or take risks, a liberal arts degree can give them exactly what they desire.

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