Student

Professor Green

English 1A

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A Costly Journey

They funnel into my house, one-by-one, with big smiles. They are neatly dressed and often holding a bottle of wine. My parent’s greet them with hugs as they congregate in the kitchen, laughing, talking, and drinking. They finally settle-in at the dining room table for dinner. The talk always returns to college. I’ve eavesdropped on their conversations for years. I know their stories by heart; I sometimes feel like I lived them. They are six college friends. All of them are graduates of either the class of 1990 or 1991. They are happy and successful. They own homes and luxury cars, and all six of them were liberal arts majors. This group of adults is fascinated by the current generation’s approach to choosing a college major. They question current concerns about job opportunities and supporting a family. They speak about a journey of knowledge which fed the human spirit that undergraduate education used to be. They are baffled by the declining number of liberal arts majors in current times.

My parents’ group of friends is not unique for their generation. This tightly-knit group of six represents political science, English, Russian, philosophy, sociology, and anthropology majors. They marvel that the current generation of would-be college students consider job security as a leading factor when deciding on a college major. As they tell it, they focused on which subject they excelled in, which courses seemed interesting, and the ease of getting classes as the three main factors in determining their majors. I shake my head, and wonder how the world has changed this much in 25 years.

Actually, the world has changed a lot in 25 years. The Great Recession of 2007-2009 saw unemployment rates soar into double digits, topping out at 11 percent (Twin). The mortgage crisis of 2008 sent home prices plummeting in a free-fall for five years (Twin). The Dow Jones Industrial Average hit its lowest point on March 9, 2009 (Twin). The cost of college climbed 1,120 percent since 1978 (Jamrisko, Kolet). Indeed, the world has changed a lot in 25 years. All of these changes have affected the way undergraduates approach the decision of what to major in during their four years of college. Moreover, all of these changes have led to a steep decline in liberal arts majors.

Politicians are chiming in on the subject of college majors and their comments have a deep effect on the current decline in liberal arts. First, they speak to the high cost of college. Tom Harkin, a former Iowa Democratic State Senator stated, “For Millions of young people, rising college costs are putting the American dream on hold or out of reach” (Jamrisko, Kolet).

“Return on investment” is a phrase commonly used among undergraduate students when talking about college. Rewind the calendar to 1990 and not many undergrads worried about their salaries after graduation. With the cost of college increasing, it has become prudent to determine how one will repay college loans. Your major is now a currency you take away from college. According to the publication *Market Watch*, “the grim employment prospects for English majors have been a running joke for decades, but with more data available on the best-paying jobs and majors and families growing increasingly concerned about reaping a return on their investment in college, students are running scared from majors that don’t translate directly into a job” (Berman).

Secondly, government officials are rushing-in to help bolster the number of students majoring in science, technology, engineering, and math programs; now referred to as STEM majors. They support these fields in an effort to backfill a shortage of qualified American workers for these types of jobs. Reports that the United States is losing ground in the fields of science and technology prompted former Republican Texas Governor Rick Perry to go as far as freezing state funding of liberal arts programs in 2011(Shinn). Perry opted to funnel these freed up funds into STEM programs. Perry introduced the “Perry Solution” into legislation which capped college tuition at $10,000 per year for STEM majors (Shinn). These policies were quickly adopted by the State of Florida as well. Governors defend their policies saying these changes help Americans gain the knowledge and training needed to fill open STEM jobs. Tuition is higher for liberal arts degrees in Florida and Texas (Shinn). Other states, including South Carolina, adopted similar policies and chose to siphon state subsidy money away from liberal arts education and instead apply it to STEM majors. They defend this move as not anti-liberal arts, but pro-STEM as STEM jobs were reported to be going to students from other countries who had the training these jobs required (Bidwell). Capping tuition at $10,000 per year is also attractive to undergraduate students as they decide on a major. The capped tuition rate has been very popular in California and Texas (Shinn).

Public opinion of liberal arts degrees is changing as well. With a media frenzy surrounding the importance of implementing STEM programs as early as elementary school, combined with reports that college students are graduating with an average student loan debt of $30,000, and students are left with few options but to consider plentiful employment opportunities after graduation (Bidwell). Twenty five years ago, few spoke about a return on investment in regards to a four year degree. The University of California at Los Angeles listed their undergraduate, in-state tuition as $1,200 per year in 1991 (UCLA). Compare that with today’s in-state, undergraduate tuition of $11,220 and it is clear that the cost has grown exponentially. As the cost of attending college increases, so do concerns about paying back student loans.

Finally, there is a basic misunderstanding about what liberal arts education really means. Somehow, the term itself has become synonymous with “liberalism.” In an age where the term “politically correct” has a negative connotation among conservatives, meaning many people see political correctness as a weakness or the inability to speak your mind, the liberal arts loses this segment of the population based on a basic misunderstanding of what is being taught.

Liberal arts education has been around since Roman times. The broad-based type of learning taught in these majors is commended for creating well-rounded workers. Skills lauded as cornerstones of a liberal arts education include analytical thinking, strong verbal and written communication skills, historical and cultural contextual knowledge, working independently and as part of a team as well as complex problem solving. Yet liberal arts graduates report that employment is scarce after graduation. In contrast, science and engineering related degrees boast a scant 2.6 percent unemployment rate after graduation (Cook). Combine this low statistic with an earning rate of $98,000 annually at the age of 50 for science and math degree holders, and science and engineering degrees become more attractive (Grasgreen). With positive salary and employment statistics reported for STEM majors, liberal arts majors are up against media reports of low employment rates and lower salaries (Cook). Liberal arts degrees also hold eight of the 10 spots on the worst college majors for employment list in 2016 (McWhinie).

Many proponents of liberal arts majors are weighing-in on the current decline and encouraging young undergraduate students to pursue knowledge and a career path will follow. According to CNN’s Fareed Zakaria “the data shows while engineering and technically trained students start out with a slight advantage, it evens out over time” (Zakaria). In fact, The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) and the [National Center for Higher Education Management Systems](http://www.nchems.org/) (NCHEMS) reported that a study of career paths and annual earnings for liberal arts majors at the ages of 56-60 showed that humanities and social science majors earned $2,000 per year more than undergraduates from a math or science major (Humphries).

Given all of these factors, how can an undergraduate student be expected to choose a major based on a philosophical approach to gaining knowledge? Students need a job, and a means to pay back student loans after graduation. Undergraduate students in California do not have the luxury of attending UCLA at a cost of $1,200 per year like they did in 1991 (UCLA). It is not surprising that more and more undergraduate students are not choosing a liberal arts major.

There is an argument for following your passion. There is also an argument for pursuing knowledge. There is an argument too for playing to your strengths when it comes to your education. Not everyone can graduate with an engineering degree. Not every engineering student could succeed in a sociology program. University officials are aware of this decline in liberal arts majors and they are addressing it with innovative programs aimed at nurturing a student’s passion for liberal studies and combining it with a career tract. This approach offers the liberal arts major the best of both worlds; a broad-based liberal arts degree and job focused training.

Enter Gary Olsen, President of Daemon College in New York. After more than a decade of declining numbers in liberal arts majors, Olsen responded with a revised curriculum with the goal of securing jobs for liberal art undergraduates (Olsen). The Daemon College “Plus Program” offers career tracts for “paralegal studies, community health, global business, human resource management and public policy” (Olsen). These career tracts provide students with viable job skills sought by today’s employers. Many universities are addressing the decline in liberal arts education with these two-fold degree programs (Olsen). They combine passion with practicality, and they are becoming more readily available at universities across the United States.

Arizona State University (ASU) offers more than 10 two-fold degree programs teaching liberal arts knowledge with practical job skills. The program is growing each year and recently integrated a study abroad program as part of the liberal arts/technical skills degree program. ASU reports employment is a reality for the graduates of these programs (Shinn).

Many of today’s employers were once liberal arts majors themselves. Howard Schultz, the wildly popular CEO of Starbucks majored in communications (Linshi). Richard Plepler, CEO of HBO, majored in government; Susan Wojcicki, CEO of YouTube, majored in history and literature; Steve Ells, Co-CEO of Chipotle, majored in art history; and Jack Ma, Chairman at Alibaba, majored in English (Linshi). It is interesting to note that many other current and former CEOs majored in liberal arts disciplines as well, which lends credibility to the argument that the liberal arts curricula prepares a student to become a valuable employee, if not the leader of the company.

In fact, Zakaria wrote a *New York Times* best-selling book on his view of the decline of liberal arts majors. In the book, *In Defense of a Liberal Education,* Zakaria objects to the idea that undergraduate education is beginning to look like a vocational school. In an interview with ABC News, the Yale graduate said “I fell in love with the idea of being able to take physics and poetry. Part of it is I think people don’t understand, so much of what you do in life is critical thinking. The stuff you learn specifically in a trade is obsolete five years, six years later. The ability to learn. The ability to get passionate about something is not” (Zakaria).

Zakaria raises a valid point. The focus of education as strictly technical training is short sighted. The skills needed in today’s technical fields are constantly evolving. Technology is moving at an infinite speed and the workers in these fields are in a continual state of learning to stay current. To say a four year degree is the extent of your technical education is flawed.

All of this brings us back to today. It brings us back to a world that is moving quickly. A world that is increasing in cost. A world where even our oldest institutions are changing and evolving to keep students abreast of current demands. It is also a world where sometimes, due to the quick pace, we lose sight of what is important. Perhaps we have lost sight of a journey that was once accessible to many and now, will be accessible to only a few.

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Office of the Governor

Attn: Rick Perry, Fmr. Governor  
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March 12, 2016

Dear Mr. Perry:

I am writing you this letter as a response to the change in funding you created during your administration in 2011. I’m specifically concerned with the removing of subsidized funds for liberal arts education and applying these funds to support STEM majors.

First, I would like to commend you for seeing something that needed revamping and doing something about it. I agree with you that funding for public education, especially higher education, is a flawed system needing more money than there is available in the financing streams available to the state. Secondly, I agree with what you did. I don’t support it, but I agree with it. Here’s why: you saw jobs leaving this country and you found a possible solution to keeping them here by incentivizing undergraduate students (with decreased tuition) if they majored in the disciplines that would help secure these jobs that were going to more and more foreign students each year. I appreciate the value of keeping jobs in America for Americans. I appreciate lowering college tuition as well. The cost of college has increased far more quickly than salaries over the past 30 years. So, thank you for trying to help. Thank you for creating a solution and seeing it through. Thank you for trying to make a difference.

My letter does not end here and I am not a supporter of your thought process. Here is my issue; I believe students should be able to study what interests them, regardless of cost. So I have an issue with you decreasing tuition for engineering majors and asking students majoring in other disciplines to pay more. I am reasonably committed to majoring in English. I love books. I love writing. I love the idea of thinking and studying the thoughts of others. I fret about organizing my thoughts in a meaningful way. I am not someone who qualifies for your decreased tuition. In fact, I would be faced with paying more to major in English at public college in Texas than I would if I were majoring in Engineering. To make this problem worse, I would struggle to find employment after graduation.

Let me summarize, I would be paying more for college in Texas and earning less after graduation than your engineering majors. This is difficult to justify. As a young student, shouldn’t we all pay the same tuition? Newspapers are struggling everywhere. Perhaps an influx of young reporters could provide a fresh perspective to these venerable companies? Perhaps young reporters could be the economic shot-in-the-arm these organizations need to become successful again? Perhaps government officials could get behind supporting reduced tuition for English majors looking to hone their skills in the field of journalism after graduation? This might keep more newspapers open, thus keeping more jobs in this country.

Do jobs have to be leaving this country to be deemed important by legislators? I understand the reasons your Perry Solutions program was accepted and considered a success. Can you understand where I am coming from and why the liberal arts are important to me? Please let me know if you have any questions about my thoughts regarding your Perry Solutions program. As I stated above I enjoy organizing thoughts, mine and the thoughts of others, and organizing them in a meaningful way.

Thank you for your work to make the State of Texas a better place for Texans. Thank you for your original ideas.

Sincerely,

Sarah Jane Catarozoli

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