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Choosing a College Major in the 21st Century–A Recent Grad Tells His Story

Posted September 02, 2009 at 9:07 am in [Blog](#), [Educational Consulting](#) [Comment](#)

Yesterday I explained that I started up a [conversation about education](#) in the 21st century with a Twitter friend, Alex Berger. The conversation began because we had both listened to a [piece](#) on

NPR's Talk of the Nation, in which guests debated the value of particular college majors.

Alex wrote me an extended email in which he gave his views about higher education and selecting a major and pursuing a career. It seems to me that more professors--like the one interviewed for the NPR story--should be talking to young people like Alex.

So here is Alex presenting his views.

Let me start by introducing my general background. I'm a graduate of Arizona State University (ASU) class of 07' with a degree from the Barrett Honors College and the Hugh Downs School of Human Communication. For additional info – feel free to check out my about me page on <http://virtualwayfarer.com> or <http://alex-berger.net>. That said, I started an internship my sophomore year of college with Colliers International, which turned into a part time (20hr/wk) job during the school year and full time (40/wk) position during the summer. After 3 years with the company I left several months after graduating, traveled for 3 months, then began with my current company – a mid-market mergers and acquisitions firm.

The first thing about the Talk of the Nation interview I couldn't stand was the basic advice. It was the same garbage they've been feeding students for years. Look at what's big now and pick a major that will service that demand. Which is about as good advice as the people that suggested investing heavily in the stock market when it was at 14,000 points.

We live in a time in which the economy is turning over. The industrial era is winding down and a digital era has begun. Things are transitioning and the workforce is turning over in a way that hasn't been seen for decades. If people think it's a unique climate now, wait until the Digital Natives start entering the work force. Millennials and the shock they've brought with them will be a light breeze compared to the impending tornado.

Another portion of the interview that rubbed me the wrong way was the disdain for liberal arts degrees. I confess I'm a liberal arts person – but then again so is the world. Guys like the gentleman in the interview keep pushing students towards statistical degrees. Which is great...if you don't understand technology. Computers do math better. They're more accurate, smarter, and driven by a binary language. Look at what the PC did to the accounting industry. People on the other hand are not linear.

Now, don't get me wrong – there's always going to be a place for engineers, doctors and the like – but this sort of professional education is not the holy career grail it's made out to be. Especially when American industry is re-tooling. From talking to other professionals – I've found that the response is generally the same. Are you preparing to be a doctor? An engineer? A biochemist? A financial analyst/accountant? If yes, your degree matters. If no – your degree serves a different purpose – but it doesn't matter nearly as much as is suggested.

The era of one degree, one career is dead – and it's a shame that educational dialogue and counseling hasn't realized this.

So here's the best advice I got in college:

I started out at Arizona State as a business major, focusing on international business/marketing

/management. However, by my sophomore year I realized I hated the program. I'm a liberal arts person and come from a family of educators, not a bunch of statisticians. However, I felt trapped because I'd been led to believe that I HAD to have a Business degree. I believed that I'd get an internship junior year, then transition into a grunt position within the company. Put in a few years, pay my dues, then move up and make a career out of things. So, there I was about to begin my junior year in a program that wasn't preparing me for the slice of the professional world I wanted, but I was stubbornly slugging it out because I thought I had to.

As luck had it, the company I was working for had a tailgating event before an ASU football game. Most of us never left the tent, keg and wine set up in the parking lot at Sun Devil Stadium. After a while I found myself chatting with one of our clients. He asked me the series of questions you'd no doubt ask an incoming junior.

"What's your major?" he asked.

"Business," I replied, "but I'm debating changing programs so – I don't know".

"Well then, what do you want to do?"

I only had a shrug, nervous fidget and "I don't know" to share.

After a few more similar questions, the gentleman waved his hand and said, "Don't worry about it. Here's what you need to do – find something you enjoy and pick that for your major. Put in your time and get your degree. That's all we care about."

At first, I was resistant – the advice was all well and good, but I had a career to launch. This was my future. I couldn't blow it and tens of thousands of dollars on a wasted degree. So, I pushed back.

To which he responded "College is one of the hardest things you'll ever do".

I scoffed and responded – College was a lot of things...but difficult? Hardly. Show up to class, doze off, raise your hand, respond to a question, tune back out – and get distracted by pretty girls. Monotonous? Full of brief moments of absolute panic? Sure. But difficult? Hardly.

He waved a hand, and said, "No no no. You're going about it all wrong. College is difficult," he continued, "because for 3 to 5 years you have to balance everything. Your finances, your personal life, your love life, your social life, work, people you hate, classes you don't care for etc. And above all you have to stick with it. You have to perform and complete the task you committed to when you started college."

It was then that he shared with me that as an employer and successful business owner he didn't care what degree I had. He did, however, care that I had one. Because that diploma demonstrated that for four years I'd set to a task, balanced everything, and overcome one of the most monumental undertakings I'd ever faced. After all, he said, if he hired me he would have to re-train me, anyhow. So what was far more important to him was the proof I could complete the tasks he put in front me...if I wanted to.

It was only then that it clicked and I realized how poor the advice and party line I'd been fed really was.

I followed his advice. I switched to communication, completed my honors degree, and I now work in an industry, business, and position that most finance majors would kill for. Why? Because I pursued what mattered – people, experience, resume and competence.

At the end of the day, higher education lays a groundwork and teaches you how to learn. The workplace takes that ability to learn, and trains you to be useful by fulfilling a set of roles or tasks. Only after college does the real training begin.

Alex Berger

So what do you think of Alex's views? Feel free to leave us a comment below!

Mark Montgomery
[Educational Consultant](#)

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About the Author

[Mark Montgomery](#)

Mark is a leading educational consultant. His experience as a professor, college administrator, and youth mentor help him guide students from around the country and around the world.

9 Responses to “Choosing a College Major in the 21st Century–A Recent Grad Tells His Story”

1. September 2, 2009 at 10:18



[Alex Berger](#) says:

Mark,

Thank you for giving voice to this exchange and discussion. It's wonderful to have an opportunity to reach out to students facing the frustrations and misinformation I found so misleading while in school.

2. September 2, 2009 at 14:02



[David](#) says:

I'm in total agreement. The advice here is right on the mark. I've recently returned for a job working for the U.S. State Department for the Foreign Service overseas. Even in such a career oriented environment (I worked Political/Economic Section which focuses on political and economic statistics and affairs while mixing international relations) I was chosen not for a degree in the required field (my degree is a liberal arts degree in global studies) but because of my resume and my demonstrated ability to adapt and be taught.

They couldn't care less about my degree past the confirmation that it was completed. As Alex mentions I was retrained as soon as I hit the ground. Adaptability and fortitude and passion are key.

3. September 2, 2009 at 20:10



[Linda P. Taylor](#) says:

It wasn't the major that makes success – it is the STUDENT and their drive and focus. Here is a great example. Passion will always win. It's the students who take communications as the “non-major major” and drift through that give liberal arts a bad name!

Linda P. Taylor

<http://www.CollegeFundingNetwork.com>

4. September 5, 2009 at 19:04



[Alex Berger](#) says:

Linda,

Your response is somewhat unclear, so forgive me if i've misunderstood your intent. I assume that you're implying that I'm representative of the students who “drift through” the program and reflect poorly on it?

I realize that my message to current students may be somewhat threatening to those with conventional views. That said, I'm curious how you justify that implication given my academic record and professional record. I was one of three honors students from the Communication program at the Honors Convocation. Keep in mind that the Hugh Downs School of Human Communication is one of Arizona State University's most most sought after degrees and that ASU is the 2nd largest University in the U.S. with nearly 69,000 students.

My articles and written works have already been published in a number of conventional and new media outlets.

I'm curious, in light of that track record, what constitutes giving liberal arts a “good name” in your book?

5. September 8, 2009 at 09:44



[Dee](#) says:

I am sending this link to my son who is grappling with this question of a major. He just entered college this month and is rather unsure.

By the way Alex, I got the impression that Linda identified your drive and focus the great example. Hope she clears it up.

6. September 9, 2009 at 17:27



[Mark](#) says:

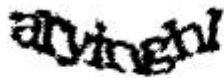
Thanks, Dee. Great to hear from you, and glad to know Alex's post is helpful. And I agree with you that Alex may have misinterpreted Linda's comment: I think she is complimenting him on his drive and focus.

All the best!

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