

Experiential Education

I smell the faint breeze of autumn forests, glowing soft hues of warmth. It's that time of the year.

Time to start applying for colleges—or not.

My little sister is hesitant, and understandably so. Tuition rates have gone up. She's also grown up since I last saw her. It's her first day of school again, and like always, we walk to the bus stop.

I break the silence.

“So...have you thought about college?”

She nods. She's got a question for me, too.

“Is it worth it?”

I recall the fear and isolation as I stumbled into the great halls of college, unable to comprehend my own confusion. But I said hello to microbiologists, nurses-in-training, single parents, architects, social activists—instructors and students with various educations and cultures—and I reveled in these communities that offered a sense of belonging. And things *clicked* when I connected two sides of the same conflict in my soils and history of labor class; the nuances between the late 19th century lumber labor force and the government Forest Service. And when my design class assigned a building scenario, I detailed a landscape solution with no building at all. Unlike high school, my liberal arts education prompted freedom through recognizing the interconnectivity of our world.

“...It's worth so much more,” I tell her.

People smile apologetically when they discover my degree-in-training is ‘only’ a Bachelor’s of Arts and Science. It’s always an interesting conversation. My liberal arts degree sparked an inner dialogue between technology and arts; complementary rather than contradictory; the foundation of a critical thought process advantageous in our information-flooded society. To paraphrase my professor— *“There’s always room for creative people!”*—creativity extends beyond the arts. I focused on my colleagues’ reading skills to help them improve in math and biology. I sought to clarify architectural design processes by examining the pedagogical methods of teaching design courses. And in the corporate office, I employed technical AutoCAD skills and public speaking abilities, culminating in a conference where I demonstrated the process and significance of well-designed mass rapid transit infrastructure to the general public.

I pursued a study in design, but also learned through scientific inquiry, abstract theory papers, and historical precedents. Liberal arts offered specialization while establishing a healthy curiosity about my surroundings: moments with people and places that simply come together (or fall apart) when you share hours of frustration and relief on a ten page paper; when the pouring rain breaks into a rainbow during a class field trip. I gained such experiences that I can’t quite elucidate on a resume, but developed into qualities such as how I value volunteer outreaches to teach youth; why I am fascinated by fungi. To put a price on how much higher education has contributed to me as a person is impossible.

But education costs a price increasingly many people cannot afford. It’ll be difficult if— *when* my sister decides to attend a liberal arts college. But I know it’s worth it.