

## Defending What Counts

With graduation quickly approaching, I have begun reflecting on the purposes my college experience has served. I believe a primary function of universities is to equip students with the skills necessary to be committed and productive professionals within a community. How then, have my own courses, professors, and academic experiences equipped and enriched me in a way unique to higher education? Simply put, what has truly counted in college?

Freshman year, I anticipated that learning skills directly applicable to a desired vocation would be most essential. At the time, I wanted to pursue pediatrics; thus it I believed it was most important for me to retain knowledge from organic chemistry, human anatomy, and developmental psychology courses. In hindsight, I realize that while these classes were valuable, I have inevitably forgotten details about ketones, dermatomes, and Erik Erikson. Thus, not everything that “counted” toward my major counted in an enduring sense.

In two months, I will graduate with a B.A. in Health Sciences; ultimately, I plan to pursue a career as an occupational therapist. Although my science courses and O.T. prerequisites have significantly aided my understanding of physical and psychological components of human health, they have not fostered my passion for addressing deficits in human health alone. Unexpected liberal arts courses have influenced the role I see myself playing in the community as a professional. For instance, photography taught me to search for images worth capturing even in the most decrepit surroundings, knowing few places are void of beauty. Sociology and American Diversity courses forced me to consider the harsh realities of poverty and racial discrimination on individual wellbeing.

Together these courses have taught me that the inherent beauty of the human spirit perseveres even in the midst of oppressive or uncontrollable circumstances. I hope to incorporate this worldview into my work as an occupational therapist by empowering patients to overcome physical and psychological barriers to find strength within themselves. On paper, my liberal arts courses merely fulfilled a Gen-Ed requirement; in actuality, they have transformed my approach to caring for future patients.

In a broader sense, not only does a liberal arts education increase *what* students, it also strengthens the *way* students learn. For example, foreign language courses challenge students to develop methods for conceptualizing unfamiliar grammatical rules and memorizing vocabulary. Exposure to alternative worldviews in philosophy, religion, and literature courses forces students to examine the bases of their own beliefs. As professionals in STEM fields, this ability to adapt to changing work environments and to justify actions stemming from personal knowledge is instrumental. Thus, the impact of liberal arts courses continues to count well beyond graduation.

No true dichotomy exists between the liberal arts and STEM courses. On the contrary, the integration of liberal arts and STEM education helps to foster a sense of purpose within individuals and equip students for work in a dynamic world. Such an education produces impassioned, capable professionals. This integration should not be feared and fought, but rather embraced and defended.