

Why a Liberal Arts Degree Is Not As Useless As Everyone Might Think

Being a rather astute student, I've been planning for college for nearly eight years. In this time I have received more advice than I can possibly reiterate from sources as obvious as my parents to those as unusual as the clerk at the grocery store. I have been told everything from “*don't bother getting a degree; you're just wasting your money*” to “*go all the way; a four-year program can't get you a good job nowadays*”, but what has been congruent in all this advice is the notion that a liberal arts degree is somehow worth less than a traditional degree.

Now, when you hear the same opinion repeated over and over again you start to regard it as fact, which I'm guessing is how all the old scientists came to believe the world is flat. Coming into high school, when the prospect of college became so much more real to me, I had this misconceived notion that I could never prosper with a liberal arts degree. Although my passion was for psychology, I was hard pressed to find a school that offered a Bachelor of *Science* in psychology, as it was often regarded as a strictly liberal arts major.

So, as I began looking into various schools, my search was for good programs in the natural sciences, something that I had been told would “*bring in the big bucks*” which is something every college hopeful wants to pay off those hefty student loans. I figured that even if I wasn't that interested in a career in math or physics, at least I wouldn't have the dreaded liberal arts degree that worked like a giant blemish on my resume. This rationale has recently changed, however.

I had pretty much given up on the prospects of being an engineer or astrophysicist and resigned myself to a Bachelor of Arts in psychology, a field that interested me but would likely lead away from my dreams of being a researcher, when I picked up the book *A Whole New Mind*. This book was about a revolution, but not one of the political type. Instead, it was about a revolution of society and, furthermore, a revolution of the mind.

In *A Whole New Mind*, Daniel Pink talks about how right-brained thinkers (the people who are caring and thoughtful, visual learners, and experts on reading people and verbal communication) are currently the “outcasts” of society, the artists and poets and designers that are thought to have wasted their four years getting a liberal arts degree only to end up in a job unrelated to their majors. The left-brain thinkers, on the other hand, are the people society holds in high regard: the scientists, the engineers, the thinkers and doers and organizers who make the high(er) salaries.

Pink argues that this dynamic is changing. In essence, he says that the mechanical jobs of the left-brained thinkers are now moving to computers and workers in Asia who can do the same thing for lower wages. Instead, the skills that are becoming increasingly useful in society and the workplace are the ones inherent to right-brainers: the ability to get along and understand their

colleagues, the ability to think of creative solutions to current problems, the ability to present their ideas in a multitude of enticing ways. But alas, fear not left-brainers, Pink illustrates many ways in which one can strengthen their right-brains to prepare for the future, most of which involve strengthening English, language, writing, communication, and thinking skills. All these skills, I noticed, were the focuses of a liberal arts degree. Suddenly I began to feel a little less worried about my future prospects.

The difference between a typical liberal arts degree and a standard four-year degree (such as a bachelor of science) is the type of classes they each require. Standard degrees want a fair sprinkling of all types of courses, much like high schools: a little bit of math, some sciences, a few courses in English and history, and that's about it. Liberal arts degrees, however, have a bigger focus on what they like to call '*bettering the individual*'. For example, the school I'm attending next fall, St. Edward's University (a liberal arts school), requires their students to take two English classes, a philosophy class, an ethics class, an oral communications class, two foreign language classes, six cultural foundations classes (like history, literature, and global studies), a class entitled 'The Human Experience', two science classes, a computer class, and only one math class. Quite a hefty list, but it shows that the liberal arts education isn't focused on giving its students a well-rounded education, but rather focuses on making their students into well-rounded people.

And therein lies the secret I, and so many others, have overlooked. While a standard four year degree will give you a little experience in a lot of different subjects, a liberal arts degree gives you the skills necessary for getting the most out of your future, in the workplace and in your free time. They give you English and writing classes so that you know how to read, interpret, and respond to a variety of texts, which is essential in any career. They give you public speaking and presentation classes so that you are prepared to present your ideas and give talks in graduate school and beyond. They give you the ability to understand another language and appreciate a global perspective, skills that are necessary in a world as interconnected as this one. They even throw in a philosophy class to get you thinking about your life, your actions, and the world around you.

After reading *A Whole New Mind* I've come to realize that my prior misconceptions (and those of the people around me) were entirely misguided. A liberal arts education doesn't give you a huge background in science and math, sure, and I can see how some think that it pads your resume with English and history classes, however in terms of real-world application, these classes are more useful. The classes required for a Bachelor of Arts degree are the classes that strengthen those right-brained skills like understanding literature, verbal communication, and emotional intelligence that Pink argues are essential for future graduates. Even without the right-brained benefits, I am of the opinion that the types of courses in a liberal arts degree are the ones that will make you a well-rounded person, whether you want to be a painter or a neuroscientist. So, let's collectively break that stereotype that liberal arts degrees are somehow worth less than traditional degrees and give them the credit they deserve.