

COMMENT

LEARNING BY DEGREES

by Rebecca Mead JUNE 7, 2010



A member of the Class of 2010—who this season dons synthetic cap and gown, listens to the inspirational words of David Souter (Harvard), Anderson Cooper (Tulane), or Lisa Kudrow (Vassar), and collects a diploma—need not be a statistics major to know that the odds of stepping into a satisfying job, or, indeed, any job, are lower now than might have been imagined four long years ago, when the first posters were hung on a dorm-room wall, and having a .edu e-mail address was still a novelty. Statistically speaking, however, having an expertise in statistics may help in getting a job: according to a survey conducted by the National Association of Colleges and Employers, graduates with math skills are more likely than their peers in other majors to find themselves promptly and gainfully employed.

The safest of all degrees to be acquiring this year is in accounting: forty-six per cent of graduates in that discipline have already been offered jobs. Business majors are similarly placed: forty-four per cent will have barely a moment to breathe before undergoing the transformation from student to suit. Engineers of all stripes—chemical, computer, electrical, mechanical, industrial, environmental—have also fared relatively well since the onset of the recession: they dominate a ranking, issued by Payscale.com, of the disciplines that produce the best-earning graduates. Particular congratulations are due to aerospace engineers, who top the list, with a starting salary of just under sixty thousand dollars—a figure that, if it is not exactly stratospheric, is twenty-five thousand dollars higher than the average starting salary of a graduate in that other science of the heavens, theology.

Economics majors aren't doing badly, either: their starting salary averages about fifty thousand a year, rising to a mid-career median of a hundred and one thousand. Special note should be taken of the fact that if you have an economics degree you can, eventually, make a living proposing that other people shouldn't bother going to college. This, at least, is the approach of Professor Richard K. Vedder, of Ohio University, who is the founder of the Center for College Affordability and Productivity. According to the *Times*, eight out of the ten job categories that will add the most employees during the next decade—including

home-health aide, customer-service representative, and store clerk—can be performed by someone without a college degree. “Professor Vedder likes to ask why fifteen percent of mail carriers have bachelor’s degrees,” the paper reported.

The argument put forth by Professor Vedder (Ph.D., University of Illinois) is, naturally, economic: of those overly schooled mail carriers, he said, “Some of them could have bought a house for what they spent on their education.” Another economist, Professor Robert I. Lerman, of American University (Ph.D., M.I.T.), told the *Times* that high schools, rather than readying all students for college, should focus on the acquisition of skills appropriate to the workplace. According to the *Times*, these include the ability to “solve problems and make decisions,” “resolve conflict and negotiate,” “coöperate with others,” and “listen actively.”

It may be news that the academy is making a case for the superfluity of the academy, but skepticism about the value of college, and of collegians, is hardly novel. Within the sphere of business, a certain romance attaches to the figure of the successful college dropout, like Steve Jobs, who was enrolled at Reed for only a semester, or Bill Gates, who started at Harvard in 1973 but didn’t get his degree until it was granted, honorarily, thirty-four years later. On the political stage, too, having spent excessive hours in seminar rooms and libraries is widely regarded as a liability. *Vide* Peggy Noonan’s celebration, during the 2004 Presidential campaign, of George W. Bush’s lack of cerebration. “He’s not an intellectual,” Noonan wrote in the *Wall Street Journal*. “Intellectuals start all the trouble in the world.”

The candidates’ education, or the insufficiency thereof, came up again during the most recent Presidential election. Sarah Palin told Katie Couric that she was “not one of those who maybe came from a background of, you know, kids who perhaps graduate college and their parents get them a passport and give them a backpack and say go off and travel the world”—even though Palin evidently considered college important enough to have tried out five different ones within three years. Meanwhile, Barack Obama’s degrees from prestigious universities were, to his critics, evidence of his unfitness for office. “The last thing we need are more pointy-headed intellectuals running the government,” the political scientist Charles Murray (B.A., Harvard; Ph.D., M.I.T.) said during the closing months of the campaign. As President, Obama has rightly noted that too many Americans are already skipping college or dropping out, even without economists having advised

them to do so; within weeks of the Inauguration, he pledged to increase the national graduation rate, which is significantly lower than that of many other developed nations, including Canada, Japan, and Korea.

The skip-college advocates' contention—that, with the economic downturn, a college degree may not be the best investment—has its appeal. Given the high cost of attending college in the United States, the question of whether a student is getting his or her money's worth tends to loom large with whoever is paying the tuition fees and the meal-plan bills. Even so, one needn't necessarily be a liberal-arts graduate to regard as distinctly and speciously utilitarian the idea that higher education is, above all, a route to economic advancement. Unaddressed in that calculus is any question of what else an education might be for: to nurture critical thought; to expose individuals to the signal accomplishments of humankind; to develop in them an ability not just to listen actively but to respond intelligently.

All these are habits of mind that are useful for an engaged citizenry, and from which a letter carrier, no less than a college professor, might derive a sense of self-worth. For who's to say in what direction a letter carrier's thoughts might, or should, turn, regardless of the job's demands? Consider Stephen Law, a professor of philosophy at the University of London, who started his working life delivering mail for the British postal service, began reading works of philosophy in his spare time, decided that he'd like to know more, and went on to study the discipline at City University, in London, and at Oxford University. (A philosophy graduate in the Class of 2010, by the way, stands to earn an average starting salary of forty thousand dollars a year, rising to a lifetime median of seventy-six thousand. Not exactly statistician money, but something to think about.) Indeed, if even a professionally oriented college degree is no longer a guarantee of easily found employment, an argument might be made in favor of a student's pursuing an education that is less, rather than more, pragmatic. (More theology, less accounting.) That way, regardless of each graduate's ultimate path, all might be qualified to be carriers of arts and letters, of which the nation can never have too many. ♦

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