

# Opinion

## TAKE THIS DEGREE AND SHOVE IT

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During an activity in my art history class the professor projected two paintings at the front of the room. The first was by Rembrandt van Rijn, famous for his mastery of shadow and light, and

the other was by Jackson Pollock, noted for his pieces that consist of paint thrown across enormous canvasses.

As aficionados-in-training, the professor set to us the task of comparing and contrasting the two works. I was among the first selected to present my analysis. Admittedly, I knew the correct answer, that is, the answer the professor was looking for. Instead, however, I opted to interject my true opinion on the subject; that the primary difference between the pieces was that Rembrandt's required talent to create and that I could have painted the Pollock in my garage the previous weekend. Needless to say the professor was disappointed in my contribution and disagreed with my analysis, though no explanation was provided to me as to how getting drunk and throwing paint at a canvass is proof of talent or genius.

The only satisfactory answer I have ever received as to why a Pollock is worth millions of dollars came from Orson Welles' 1976 documentary "F for Fake". In the film Welles states that art only has value because an elite "expert" class deems it has value. Authentic or otherwise, all a work needs is a nod from one of these experts to be worth a fortune. During the film an artist brags of forging a Picasso and then having it authenticated and appraised for thousands of dollars. Laughing, the artist throws the "authentic" Picasso in to a fire and watches it burn.

With my degree from the College of Liberal Arts nearly complete, I cannot help but see a disturbing correlation between this fraudulent world of art and that of academia.

Lacking firm boundaries and pre-requisites, a student of the liberal arts' transcript quickly becomes a disorienting hodge-podge of miscellaneous coursework. Understanding the relationship between the contents of a physics class, a Spanish class, and an introductory psychology class is difficult – explaining why all of these classes are required to one day qualify a student as a political scientist (whatever that is) makes the final leap to impossibility.

This splattering of courses across a transcript is considered a worth-while education for the same reason Jackson Pollock's splattering of paint across a canvass is considered art – it has been deemed as such by "experts"; experts who have significant financial interest in the sale of their respective, otherwise worthless, goods.

While Socrates and Rousseau have been studied for centuries, the ever-increasing demands of a technology-driven world leave little room for the abstract thought philosophy and similarly esoteric fields of study are built upon. However, to dump these musty works in a generic western civilizations class and forget about them would be heresy against all of western culture and, more importantly, leave entire university departments unemployed. Retaining these jobs only requires that courses be vindicated by full classrooms.

Destined to warm the empty seats of practically useless classes are liberal arts majors, students conned by high school guidance counselors into believing that their fortunes could be made with a degree in Comparative Literature or Religious Studies. By comprising liberal arts degrees of these left-over classes, universities have found an ingenious way of turning their trash into gold and students find that rather than getting a degree in what they selected as their major they are getting an education in generically being educated.

To say all liberal arts degrees do not

have applications outside the academic world is unfair. The structure of a college linguistics program, for example, provides an excellent opportunity to learn and study new languages, a skill with applications across numerous industries. Still, many of these programs are inflated to four-year degrees with unrelated and useless material. I can speak about the political science major here at Penn State from personal experience. By the end of this year, my second full year at Penn State, I will have completed all of the classes directly relating to my major. During these two years I also consistently maintained jobs relating to politics, campaigning, and government.

From a practical standpoint my experiences at work have proven far more relevant to my goals than my classes, however, I understand the wide range of material presented in the classroom can have use further down the road. What is frustrating is that even though I have essentially completed my formal political science education I must now spend two years taking gym and art classes to fluff my two-year education into a four-year degree – two years that would be spent more effectively obtaining hands-on experience in the field. Ironically, my education is preventing me from getting an education.

Universities need to put more time, money and energy into developing actual liberal-arts degrees. I have three basic recommendations for improving the liberal arts college based on my experience.

Degrees must be based around practicality rather than academia. If a course cannot justify its existence by directly furthering a student's education, do not use it. Do not throw it out, though. Put the curriculum on a bookshelf in some dark room in case it is ever needed; much like how the United States keeps a contingency plan in case we ever need to invade Canada.

Do not only hire professors and consultants from the world of academia. Many who have wallpapered their offices with degrees lack the nuanced experiences of experts from the field. Most liberal arts degrees are not technically intensive and a proper education requires that students be aware of those subtleties. Though it may feel counter-intuitive someone with only an undergraduate degree, or no college degree at all, may be the best expert you can find on a given subject provided they have the years of experience to back up their opinions. The opposite is equally as true; just because someone has two doctoral degrees does not mean they have any clue as to what they are talking about.

Finally, if when a satisfactory curriculum for a degree is completed it is only two years long either let it be or find a valuable way to fill those remaining two years. Ballroom dancing and yoga do not count as a valuable uses of my time and money.

To the world of academia, consider this your bluff being called. For years you have explained away the whiskey-inspired "Pollock-esque" requirements of the supposed educations you peddle. Given the constant increases in tuition and the exorbitant cost of textbooks those convoluted explanations can no longer be tolerated. From now on if I am going to pay \$50,000 for a piece of paper it better be an original Rembrandt.

In the upcoming weeks I should finally be getting my shoelaces back from the registrar's office and with that I will conclude my sentence here at Penn State Harrisburg. Thank you to those who have read my ramblings over the years. It has been quite an experience. Unfortunately, now that this piece has been published I fear my last days in Middletown will be spent warding off an angry tweed-clad mob of Ph.D.s from slashing my tires; though considering how my time here played out, it is a fitting end.



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