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The Value of Higher Education

Institutions of higher education have been in existence for several centuries. The original purpose for institutions of higher education was formulated around religious beliefs and the aim of individuals to fulfill their vocation. Individuals would attend theological colleges, or seminaries, in order to be ordained into the ministry. Through the process of ordination, seminarians would develop a sense of morality and humanity. While higher education was primitively created for religious purposes, over the course of time, institutions have become more secularized. With this secularization, colleges and universities have broadened their course selections to provide students with a general knowledge and allows students to funnel in on specialized degree programs. These general education courses and specialized degree programs allow students to fulfill their “vocation” and obtain a career that pertains to their “calling in life”. In addition, college provides students with a diverse atmosphere and encourages them to get involved within the institution as well as the community. The student inclusion within the institution and surrounding community emphasizes the development of social skills and a worldly perspective that funnels in on the ideologies of humanity and ethics. The development of twenty-first century skills such as: communication, networking, critical thinking, ethics, and a worldly perspective, has become a key component in the benefits of the college experience. Higher Education’s general education courses provide individuals with a worldly perspective, while degree programs in addition provide the essential skills that will be utilized in their future profession.

General Education courses within institutions of higher education provide students at the undergraduate level with an opportunity to expand their knowledge and perspective pertaining to the world surrounding them. Typical general education courses that students must take include: English, history, mathematics, a foreign language, a variation of an art course, etc. According to Elizabeth A. Dooley’s article, “Matching the Purpose of the General Education Curriculum with the Reality of Its Implementation”, general education is “designed to offer courses that contribute to students’ worldview and develop specific skills within a major focus area” (Dooley). This is the primary reason that students must satisfactorily complete their general education courses in order to obtain a degree. For instance Longwood University’s website states that the general education program is comprised of fourteen goals established to equip students with a broad spectrum of academic disciplines ("General Education at Longwood: The Academic Core"). Questions concerning the reasoning behind taking mandatory general education courses often arise because the courses students are taking arguably could not relate to their major. However, students entering into college are young adults with prior knowledge and perspectives. Within a university’s courses and a variety of commencement speeches, professors and speakers aim to inspire students to look at situations objectively, with multiple perspectives, and confront them while using critical thinking skills. A decent representation of this is seen when David Brooks in “The Big University” states that “it’s tough to know how much philosophical instruction anybody can absorb at the age 20, before most of life has happened, but seeds can be planted” (Brooks 2). Goal 8 for the Social Sciences and Goal 9 for Diversity, are examples of how students are presented with the opportunity to adopt various perspectives through courses such as: Sociology, Psychology, World History, World Religions, and even the histories for specific countries. Another aim of Longwood University’s general education courses is to transform each student into a citizen leader. Citizen Leaders according to Longwood exemplify personal responsibility, self-sufficiency, and community service. The essential skills of personal responsibility and self-sufficiency are skills that can easily be applied to day to day life and situations, while taking into consideration the worldly perspective obtained through the general education courses. While some individuals argue that personal responsibility and self-sufficiency can develop through taking online courses, the value of community service is not present through online college. Community Service is a component of Longwood’s general education program to allow students to network and apply concepts and skills obtained.

Degree Programs serve as an addition to the general education curriculum in institutions of higher education and allow students to funnel their knowledge in on a specific field of study in which they must apply previous knowledge and skills attained through general education courses. Longwood University is home to two highly accredited degree programs which are the Nursing Program and the Teacher Preparation Program. The official Longwood University 2015-2016 Catalog provides current and potential students with a deeper understanding into the degree program of interest. For instance, the Longwood Catalog states that the Nursing program is, “Built on a strong science foundation, the program includes coursework in the liberal arts and humanities and extensive clinical experiences in both healthcare settings and in the clinical simulation laboratory [as well as] a summer clinical externship and a final semester intensive practicum” (“University Catalogs”). This degree program’s foundation allows students to apply their knowledge and skills, such as critical thinking and mutual respect, from the liberal arts and humanities by having students take part in clinical experiences. Longwood University’s Department Chair of Nursing, Deborah Ulmer on Longwood University’s website states that the clinical experiences are “designed to help you move from critical thinking to clinical judgment”(Ulmer). In other words, the program aims to apply and build on student’s previous skills and make them applicable to real life situations. Individuals may claim that these skills and experiences instilled within Longwood’s Nursing Program could be obtained through community college, however, Longwood’s program is valuable in that there is the presence of clinical experiences, simulations, and partnerships within the practicum which may not be accessible through community college. The basis of Longwood University’s nursing curriculum is extremely rigorous and that is to ensure that those who satisfactorily complete the program are well equipped to work in the field (Ulmer). The Teacher Preparation Program, is another golden gem at Longwood University. The Teacher Prep Program has a wide range of courses that pertain to students’ major. According to the Longwood University Catalog, students within this program are required to take specific courses pertaining to what they will be teaching, various teaching styles, and what teaching styles are the most beneficial for students at certain ages. In order to understand the purpose behind certain teaching styles, students take EDUC 245: Human Growth and Development, to understand the “physical, cognitive, and social-emotional development of human beings” (“University Catalog”). In addition to the courses within the classroom, to keep the program rigorous and accredited Education Majors take part in two practicums where students: can observe teaching within a variety of age groups and students can teach for themselves. These practicums similar to the clinical experiences in Nursing ensure that students are equipped to work in the field.

While general education and degree programs are essential to higher education, the “college experience” provides students with endless opportunities to expand their knowledge and beliefs through social interactions and leaves an indelible mark on the individual. As stated by Louis Menand in “Live and Learn: Why We Have College”, “Education is about personal and intellectual growth” (Menand 4). Institutes for Higher Education harvest an encouraging atmosphere to develop on a personal and intellectual level. Within colleges students have the opportunity to get involved within extracurricular activities such as: athletics, clubs, jobs, internships, study broad programs, etc. Becoming involved within a university is essential at Longwood University and many others. It allows students to “investigate current loves and teach new things to love” as well as find others with the same values and passions (Brooks). On a personal level, life-long friends are made within college and through being involved in extracurricular activities where common passions provide students with ties that grow stronger as the semester progresses. This opportunity to gain life-long friends, study abroad, and other extracurricular activities are not present in community college, thus adding value to higher education. Overall the “college experience” allows students to “define themselves as their own person”, expand the knowledge socially and intellectually, make life-long friends and become truly passionate about their vocation ("The Importance of a College Experience in Life").

The cornerstone of higher education derives from individuals longing to fulfill their vocation. As time has progressed, higher education has expanded the courses offered to individuals to ensure that students obtain a general curriculum, but also have the ability to focus on a degree program that they are passionate about. Universities currently provide students with essential twenty-first century skills such as critical thinking, ethics, and a worldly perspective obtained through general education courses. In addition universities offer these degree programs that allow students to funnel their knowledge and passion into a degree of choice that will aid in fulfilling their vocation. The general education courses provided by institutes of higher education allow individuals to obtain a worldly perspective that will later be applied to their degree program which allow them to further build on skills that will be utilized in their future profession.

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