

The recent boom in electronics industry employment in Oregon has generated a debate about the role of higher education in training students for the new high tech jobs. Some of these new industries have asserted that Oregon college graduates are deficient in basic communication skills and work ethics while also claiming that the state's technical training in computer science and electrical engineering is inadequate, requiring them to recruit out of state or cut back on expansion. So Oregonians are now debating whether our colleges and universities have an obligation to tailor their curricula to what these employers call "customer-driven education". Professor Darius Rejali, chair of the political science department at Reed College, offers some thoughts on this question.



ANDREW TAYLOR

Some Advice to Oregon's Generation X

by Darius Rejali

You're anxious about choosing your major. It's an important decision, but not for the reasons you think. After you leave college, no one will ask you what you majored in. They will want to know whether you can do—and do well—what they want you to do. Many employers will not even hire college graduates without experience because they are not confident that a degree in any major represents real skills, knowledge, and good work habits. Choosing a major is not even important for graduate school in most cases. What matters is that you have good work habits, grades, and references.

Choosing a major matters for other reasons. By realizing what you like, you are learning about what gets you up in the morning,

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and in that is a clue about your future. Choosing a major is also about learning the discipline to plan and execute academic projects during your undergraduate years. The care, fortitude, honesty, and even anger you bring to this decision shapes you and your future, for good or ill.

Should you choose a "practical" major? When your elders advise you to "be practical", they are really urging you to adopt their values: get rich so you can buy the things that makes their lives worth living. Sadly for you, there's no "Department of Prosperity" in which you can major.

Would majoring in a science make you richer than majoring in theater? Maybe. You could major in what today appear as the key industries of the future: bio-engineering, microelectronics, new materials, robotics, computers, and transportation. But before you

choose one of these, consider that the real wages of 80% of male Americans have declined between 1972 and 1992, especially in the peak earning years. Family incomes have stayed steady only because a higher proportion of women have entered the labor force. So, whether you're a woman or a man, the odds are that tomorrow you'll be working just as hard to earn less and, by your elders' values, you'll be able to buy less "freedom". The link they took for granted—that a "practical" major guaranteed high earnings—has broken down, no matter how hi-tech your training. Future engineers may earn more than journalists, but neither are going to be prosperous.

So it's not what you major in, as much as the skills you gain from your passion for learning, that will help you choose from what the labor market offers. Your success depends on how well you can think without grabbing a book for an answer, read patiently, listen carefully, develop an eye for detail, find information in unconventional ways, summarize material clearly and briefly, speak confidently, argue responsively, criticize helpfully, interpret what numbers mean, read through the words, adapt your writing skills, analyze

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themoral complexity of a situation, take multiple perspectives on a problem, master a new computer program, negotiate with others, and keep in touch with your advisers. And learn to speak a foreign language. No, not a "practical" language (you can't predict that), but any language—because to learn a language, you are preparing to command that "practical" language when and if you need it.

The future belongs to people who can weave together other people, things, and information, whether in politics or business. Major in people (the social sciences), things (the natural sciences) or informational media (mathematics, languages, arts, and literature) and learn how to connect them! Learn how to work with others effectively, analyze information quickly, and link ideas to concrete projects creatively. For that is what employers really want, and you will need these skills in an age of growing economic disparity. If you won't be able to buy the "freedoms" some of your parents had, you will have to find new ways to determine and achieve your goals. And, did I mention, you make the future, you can't major in it.