

READING, WRITING, AND REAL WORLD SKILLS

There's a bit of a debate on why Harvard sends so many of its grads to become assholes on Wall Street (as opposed to exciting point guards in the NBA?). Ezra Klein argues it's because Wall Street (and Teach for America) model their hiring processes on the application processes Harvard kids excelled at to get there in the first place, making it more likely grads with little direction will default into one of those positions. His solution is to make sure Harvard teaches more "skills" in college to make students more comfortable applying for the kinds of jobs (Ezra suggests) you find listed on Monster or Craigslist.

The issue isn't that so many of their well-educated students want to go to Wall Street rather than make another sort of contribution. It's that so many of their students end up feeling so poorly prepared that they go to Wall Street because they're not sure what other contribution they can make.

My hunch is that we have underemphasized the need to learn skills, rather than simply learn, while in college.

Matthew Yglesias disputes that liberal arts schools don't teach skills.

This seems mistaken to me. In order to do well in courses on 19th Century British Literature or Social Anthropology or Philosophy or American History in a properly running American college, what you need to do is get pretty good at reading and writing documents in the English language. These are very much real skills with wide-ranging practical applications. Clearly relatively few people are professional

writers, but a huge amount of what goes on at the higher levels of a typical business is a steady stream of production and consumption of reports and memos. If you can compose an email that's 10 percent clearer in 90 percent of the time as the other guy, you're going to get ahead in a wide range of fields.

Now, as to the question of how to get Harvard kids to embrace something useful rather than Wall Street, I think the debate thus far (see also this piece) has ignored a few key details. One thing that distinguishes kids at elite liberal arts schools is that either because of more generous financial aid or their parent's affluence fewer of them have to work their way through school (and those that do often work in work-study jobs at school). Those kids at state schools working 30 hours to pay for classes? You can bet they graduate knowing how to apply for a job.

Those that don't often acquire real world skills via extracurriculars (not to mention internships, but that's a whole different issue). When a Communications student of mine asked me once whether she should take my class or manage a band, I told her to do the latter, because it would teach her a bunch of skills she'd use in any Communications-related career, that she could put on a resume. That said, it's worthwhile to distinguish between extracurricular activities that serve a networking purpose and those that offer an opportunity to learn real world skills. A lot of what you're paying for at elite liberal arts schools is a network, but that network is a lot more likely to land you on Wall Street than saving the world.

All that said, I want to go back to the question of the skills you learn. I think it's too easy to say that knowing how to write a good 19th Century English Lit paper prepares you to write an effective email. Knowing how to write a good

19th Century English Lit paper teaches you how to write a good English paper; it may in fact teach you piss poor habits for writing emails. (Frankly, I used to find science and econ majors were better writers than English majors.)

Back when I managed a department that did corporate writing projects—the kind of things corporations would pay obscene daily rates to have fairly recent college graduates do for them—I hired a mix of tech writing and liberal arts grads. The former knew how to write emails. They knew how to use the latest software—and competing brands. They knew industry conventions on ... how to write an email. They knew bullets and fonts and desktop publishing, all critical to what we did.

The liberal arts grads turned out to be poorer writers for our purposes, at least at first. They were wordy and used too complex vocabulary and often had problems structuring documents (says the liberal arts grad notorious for writing wordy complex posts!). But they were far better at solving problems. They were the ones at a kick-off meeting who could quickly understand someone's business processes. They were better at asking questions and usually more willing to push back against arrogant execs.

And while it has been almost a decade since I taught, I found the same problem there. In 2002, I assigned junior and senior Comm majors a project that required them to work in multimedia, assuring them they could just do a very simple webpage. Only, just one of them was very comfortable doing the simplest HTML. I ended up doing a special class for a skill that, I've seen since in more industry focused schools, would have been part of a freshman introduction.

So I think top liberal arts schools can strive to offer their students more (particularly the students who can't afford to learn these things on unpaid internships during the summer).

And while I think that's an issue that could be

fairly readily addressed, I think it points to a larger problem with the way this country treats humanities, specifically. The real skills one learns in humanities majors are incredibly valuable in the real world. But very few of the professors teaching them can (and in many cases, want to) explain why that is. But that's a topic for another post.