

Educational Degree Choices- I Can't Find A Job

By Phil Rasmussen

Why is it that a lot of college graduates complain about the education they received? Several years ago, their complaints were about the “high cost” of getting that education. Today, it is about not finding employment.

In both cases, college graduates, for all the education they get, haven't learned that their choices are at the root of their complaints. However, it probably is not their fault.

Society has failed to prepare today's students. The failure can be found in several areas ranging from “social mandates” to education to parenting.

Before discussing the specifics for society's failure, we need to first understand the role that education has played in the employment process.

Before the 1900s, college education was only available to a small elite group. Most jobs at that time required experience, apprenticeships or having practical skills. College degrees mainly concentrated on law, leadership, medicine, teaching or theology.

Between 1900 and 1940, many employment areas such as engineering, science, management, nursing, and government positions started requiring college degrees as these areas became “professionalized.” While skilled labor remained the mainstay of the American economy and had their own “trade organizations/unions, professional organizations were establishing educational standards.

After World War 2, the US economy started shifting from an agricultural/manufacturing base to management, technology/science, and professional services base. At the same time, the war's ending provided the opportunity for millions of veterans to attend college through the GI Bill of 1944.

These two, changes perpetrated a sociological/cultural change where having a college degree meant status and employability.

For high school graduates, the 60's and 70's provided two paths to the middle-class economic level. Graduates could choose the manufacturing/skilled trades path through apprenticeship training, or they could enter the professional and management fields through college.

Between the 1980s and 1990s, a major transition in the American economy started taking place. Manufacturing was declining along with middle-class earnings without college. The introduction of computers in both business and industry required workers who were comfortable with new and changing technology. Consequently, employers started using degrees and certifications as screening devices for employment.

By 2010, employment often required a bachelor's degree, even if the jobs historically did not require one. While the job may not have become more difficult, the credentials required had changed.

For example, the nursing profession initially started out with on-the-job training. As time passed, nursing schools emerged, and state licensing boards and laws were established by the 1900s. By the 1950s, associate degrees in nursing (ADN) became a faster, college-based alternative to the traditional three-year hospital diploma. Today, many nursing positions require bachelor's degrees (BSN), and in some instances a master's degree (MSN) or even a doctoral degree (DPN). Regardless of which degree level is required, the nursing field also has various certification levels.

Since 2015, there has been a countertrend to the degree requirement. Employers are recognizing that many college degrees do not provide graduates with the skills needed by business and industry, and are emphasizing skills-based hiring.

While many college graduates are having trouble finding employment, businesses and industry are having trouble keeping the new hires. Regardless of whatever hiring requirements exist, the one thing that most companies and corporations have not done is to implement mentorship programs. Such programs can help retain new hires and will help foster company loyalty.

While having a college degree in the past, and in almost any area, was a key to open employment doors, that is not the case now. Today's employers want workers who have specific skill sets and who can start working almost immediately without a lot of supervision and/or training.

The old conceptual differences between blue collar vs white collar jobs have changed with the implementation of technology and artificial intelligence in the workplace. If a college graduate does not have the skill set required by a potential employer, the chances are that they will not be hired.

Now that we have a better understanding of hiring requirements over time, let's look at how select college graduates are having problems finding employment today.

Most bachelors degree programs are designed to be completed within 4 or 5 years. According to US Dept. of Education statistics, approximately 47% of students changed their primary major before graduation. College students tend to change majors or drop out of college for a variety of reasons. The typical reasons include (not rated in any order):

- They do not like the subject
- The courses are too hard
- They discover new interests
- Career and income considerations
- Choosing a major too early
- Family/parental pressure
- Financial considerations
- They discover career reality
- Poor academic advising
- Personal growth and maturity

The last three reasons tend to be the greatest reasons for changing majors. There is a lot of common overlap between these reasons, and it generally starts when the student is still in high school.

To provide some perspective, let's go back in time to January, 1973. This very important date dramatically affected the transition from adolescence to adulthood, education, careers, marriage, masculinity, politics, and people's sense of obligation to society.

In 1973 the draft ended the two-year military obligation of young men to their country. While many viewed the ending of the draft as a positive social decision, it robbed young men of a two-year period for deciding what they want to do with their lives, and the educational benefits during and after enlistment. Anecdotally, military veterans who attend college after serving are less likely to change majors than those who have never served. In many cases they are also able to apply military experience to their degree programs and reduce degree completion time.

From many aspects, we should consider reinstating the draft, not for just young men but also for young women. It should allow for the draftee to serve either in the military or civil service programs. There are many benefits both for the nation and the individual,

the least of which would help the individual mature and decide what they want to do with their life after “enlistment.”

One of the greatest failures in helping students choose a college major or career lies in the traditional approach used by guidance counselors and academic advisors. Too often, these professionals get it wrong.

When assisting students with educational and career decisions, counselors and advisors commonly:

- Ask what the student is interested in, and
- Give them the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator or a similar personality test
- Explain degree requirements
- Help students select courses
- Help students select a college and/or career field

The problem is that the counselors and advisors often fail to truly understand the student as an individual. They tend to be biased as to what constitutes the personality of these “kids” and rely on various testing programs to identify appropriate career fields that fits the students’ personality.

However, personality labels alone do not determine whether a person will experience satisfaction, fulfillment, or success in a particular career.

While the desire is to “match” the student to a particular degree program or career field, such decisions are typically based on what the student say that he/she is interested in rather than what degree/career field will satisfy the student’s personality.

Bernard Haldane, a career and vocational counselor, took a different approach in helping students to become successful in their career choices. Rather than asking “what job/career do you want?” Haldane would help students to identify their natural abilities, interests, and strengths and then match those characteristics to appropriate careers. In essence, Haldane’s approach is experienced-based whereas Myers-Briggs is preference/personality-based. Employing both approaches should be used by the counselors/advisors when working with students.

The failure to acknowledge and understand a student's interests, strengths, and individual characteristics in relation to career development and long-term success does not rest solely with guidance counselors and academic advisors. Many parents play a significant role in influencing their student’s educational and career decisions.

Parents may unintentionally guide/pressure their student toward a career based on their biases, values, experiences, or dreams rather than the student's own personality and sources of satisfaction. They should guide their student toward self-understanding—not toward some predestined career.

By the time most students are ready to enter their first year of college, they may have had some contact with a guidance counselor or academic advisor, but that contact does not necessarily provide them with a clear understanding of what lies ahead. Regardless, most students have only a limited understanding of what their chosen major or career field actually entails. At the same time, few can know with any certainty whether the path they have chosen will ultimately lead to happy, successful, and fulfilling employment after graduation.

While parents, counselors and advisors fail in helping students to match their abilities, interests, and strengths to programs of study, colleges and universities, and faculty add further to the failure by introducing non-relevant courses and course material, and by not providing appropriate building blocks of instruction. Administrators and faculty, themselves, fail to understand that “academic freedom” is not about what is taught in the classroom but how the subject is taught. It is not the teaching of personal bias, beliefs, or non-subject related material. Academic freedom is the teaching of knowledge and skills that supports the goals and objectives of the course.

Counselors/advisors, and college administrators and faculty must quickly adapt to the needs of a fast-paced and rapidly changing world. This need, requires the elimination of non-educational and social material, assignments, discussion that is not related to course curricula. The advent of the rapid AI implementation into business structure, caught the educational world by with their pants down. The failure to immediately address the AI event could have been rectified with foresight and action.

Today's world requires graduates who have a solid understanding and insight of their abilities, interests, and strengths. With that knowledge, they will be able to make decisions that will lead to a meaningful and fulfilling career.