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Florida's Leaders Wrong About Liberal Arts

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Florida's Leaders Wrong About Liberal Arts

Abstract

Once again, a prominent politician from Florida has provided an excellent opportunity to talk about the value of a liberal arts education.

In 2011, Florida Gov. Rick Scott [commented](#) about not needing any more anthropology majors. Around the same time, Florida State Sen. Don Gaetz [referred](#) to psychology and political science majors as “degrees that don’t mean much.” [*excerpt*]

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Comments

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Florida's leaders wrong about liberal arts



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BY JANET RIGGS

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- Once again, a prominent politician from Florida has provided an excellent opportunity to talk about the value of a liberal arts education.

In 2011, Florida Gov. Rick Scott [commented](#) about not needing any more anthropology majors. Around the same time, Florida State Sen. Don Gaetz [referred](#) to psychology and political science majors as “degrees that don’t mean much.”

Last year presidential candidate and former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush [said](#) he hoped those who are pursuing “that psych major deal, that philosophy major thing” know that they are going to end up working at Chick-Fil-A.

This month, Gov. Scott was back at it, [worrying](#) over the popularity of psychology as a field of study and the fact that we're "sending out graduates with degrees that don't mean much."

So what good is a psychology degree?

We know that it takes more education than a bachelor's degree for someone to earn the title of psychologist, just as it takes more education than a bachelor's degree for someone to earn the title of medical doctor or lawyer.

But does that make a psychology major useless? Of course not.

I consider it critically important that our graduates find fulfilling work that pays a good living wage. Every college president wants their graduates to have successful and gratifying professional lives.

A psychology major — or an anthropology major — or that "philosophy major thing" — all provide excellent preparation for a wide variety of jobs and careers. I would argue that any rigorous major paired with a strong and broad-based academic program in the liberal arts and sciences provides solid preparation for careers in this fast-changing globally interconnected world.

A liberal arts education improves problem-solving skills and critical analysis. It builds the ability to consider multiple perspectives when addressing a complex topic. A liberal arts degree fosters excellent written and oral communication skills. And it advances students' ability to interact and work with people from a wide variety of backgrounds.

These are skills that are key in dealing with today's challenging issues, and they are skills that are transferable across many professions. It's an approach to education that is, contrary to the opinions of Florida's political leaders, especially valuable at a time in which job requirements are fast-changing and in which we are preparing graduates for careers that don't yet exist.

College should be about more than training for one job; it should be about preparing for a lifetime of work.

And you can bet this approach works well for our students at Gettysburg College. Ninety-five percent are employed full-time or enrolled in graduate or professional school within 12 months of their graduation. According to [Payscale.com's College Salary Report for 2015-16](#) Gettysburg alumni earn more than \$50,000 annually

during their early career years and more than \$100,000 by the time they reach mid-career.

While wages are important, a residential liberal arts colleges also provide students with a tremendous opportunity for personal growth through engagement in a wide variety of co-curricular activities.

At Gettysburg College, students address social justice issues through our Center for Public Service; they develop leadership skills with the support of the Garthwait Leadership Center; they engage in debate about important public policy issues of the day through the Eisenhower Institute. In addition, our low student-faculty ratio provides the opportunity for students to be individually mentored by faculty.

The bottom line? Politicians are doing a disservice to us all by blasting the liberal arts. Residential liberal arts colleges prepare students not only for professional success, but also for lives of civic impact. Our world needs more people — not fewer — with this kind of preparation.

As for psychology majors? In addition to the liberal arts skills I've mentioned, psychology majors get an education steeped in the scientific method, statistical analysis, and writing clearly about complex subjects.

They also learn a great deal about human interaction and the causes of human behavior. They go on to have rich and diverse careers in human services, marketing, business, research, human resources, consulting, and education.

And some of us go on to be college presidents.

Janet Riggs is president of Gettysburg College in Gettysburg, Pa.

<http://www.miamiherald.com/opinion/op-ed/article57170613.html>