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Our Universities: Contemplating a Career?

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Our Universities: Contemplating a Career?

High-schoolers, make your study choices carefully. Look inside your heart, soul and mind: Determine what's right for you.

“We are prone to judge success by the index of our salaries or the size of our automobiles rather than by the quality of our service and relationship to mankind.”

Martin Luther King, Jr.

Various perspectives highlight the complexities that face students as they select areas of study. ***The STEM Crisis Is a Myth*** by Robert N. Charette, in ***Spectrum*** last month, argues that jobs in science, technology, engineering and mathematics, STEM disciplines, are not the sure thing touted by so many. Charette provides domestic data and studies from Japan, the United Kingdom, and even China that STEM careers are not employment panaceas.

Charette writes, “...wages for US workers in computer and math fields have largely stagnated since 2000.” He paints an unsettling picture: STEM industries benefit from an oversupply of STEM labor. For example, Richard K. Templeton, chief of Texas Instruments says, *“There is a skills gap in this country – for every unemployed person in the United States, there are two STEM job postings. The gap will only widen if we don’t engage now to address education at the elementary and high school levels.”*

Another prediction of STEM doom.

Additionally, a 2011 Georgetown University study shows over half the STEM graduates left the field.

Charette attributes the over-production and “scare” of shortages to seductive, rapidly changing, difficult to predict, industries.

Students, be deliberate! All that glitters is not gold.

From another perspective, Barry Schwartz, professor of psychology at Swarthmore College, urges caution as students move away from a traditional liberal arts education according to a ***Reuters*** report by Phil McCarten last week. Schwartz claims the over-emphasis on specialized training — including STEM disciplines — has a negative impact on study in the humanities. Students may neglect four questions. “What is worth

knowing? What is worth doing? What makes for a good human life? And, what are my responsibilities to other people?"

To be sure, these questions are vital. However, there is an aroma of arrogance in assuming that universities are the only places these questions get attention. Homes and parents, church, temple, synagogue, and teachers in public or private primary and secondary institutions provide insight too. Surely Professor Schwartz doesn't believe that carpenters and cashiers don't think about these things.

If universities measure success by their ability to address Schwartz's questions, universities may be faltering. Watch the evening news.

My advice about picking a major is different from Charrette's or Schwartz's.

First, find something of interest, and learn to do it well. Disregard whoever says to you an English teacher will never make a decent living. Will they get rich? No. Can they lead a fulfilling life, help feed a family, and enjoy going to work every day? Absolutely.

Second, if you perform well as a student you will find a job. The top 75% of graduates in any field find work. Dollars follow quality and performance and contentment lies in daily engagements. Over the last 38 years, I have enjoyed getting out of bed in the morning and going to work. And to make life even sweeter, I am anxious to go home in the afternoon. I know too many poor souls who dread the trip in both directions.

Third, let the passion of your pursuit lead to success. Without passion, there will be little profit, no power, and scant purposeful work.

Fourth, be mindful of employment potential, especially if borrowing. If you want to be a librarian, don't borrow much. Even if a high salaried occupation is in the cards, borrow only what's absolutely necessary. And, pay attention to your achievement and grades: Scholarships and work opportunities that offset costs will be available to you as you progress.

Charette, Schwartz, and Wendler, share a common view: choose a major carefully. Don't follow a borrowed dream, or think a particular pursuit will, in and of itself, bring satisfaction. Unfortunately this "Kool-Aid" says that any education is a guarantee of happiness and success.

I wish it were the case, but it's not.