

Why I Won't Be Your Waiter When I Graduate

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The Association of American Colleges and Universities (2011) defines liberal education as “an approach to learning that empowers individuals and prepares them to deal with complexity, diversity, and change.” There are many arguments surrounding the topic of education, and, quite frequently, they surround the effectiveness of preparing college students for careers and professions. This has led to a heavy discussion of liberal arts education and a dialogue concerning a list of so-called “useless” majors, often including Musical Theatre. While my entire experience at Birmingham-Southern has empowered me as an independent thinker, I believe that my major in Musical Theatre has equipped me with the most applicable tools for what we seniors like to refer to as the “real world.”

Recently, liberal arts education has become quite a hot topic. Seeing how unemployment rates have risen from 4% in 2000 to the current 7.9% in 2013, the potential for graduates to be without a job has become a monumental concern (U.S Department of Labor, 2013). North Carolina governor, Patrick McCrory, argues that college education is “not based on butts in seats but on how many of those butts can get jobs” (Inside Higher Ed, 2013). His argument is that students should be focused on learning vocational skill as a way to guarantee a job after graduation. If a student majors in something involving liberal arts such as Gender Studies or History, McCrory argues that they “go to a private school to take it” because majoring in a non-vocational area is “not going to get someone a job” (Inside Higher Ed, 2013). Unfortunately, this mindset of “you should only major in something that will get you hired” is quite common.

An article by Yahoo Education (2012), focused on the recruitment trends of companies and established the top five “useless” majors by determining which graduates were least likely to

be hired. Another article by The Daily Beast (2012) listed the top 13 “useless” majors by looking at statistics from Georgetown University from the last two years. Unsurprisingly, the math and science related majors remained safe and off the list while majors focusing in the arts and humanities (more specifically, theatre) were targeted. Now, one might think that this bleak way of thinking is just found in the atmosphere of big public universities or in the political sphere, but this is not the case.

Almost every day at Birmingham-Southern College, I am confronted with peers questioning the validity of my major. I am not studying math or science, I am not pre-med, and I do not plan on going to law school. What on earth do I plan on doing with my life? During the school year, I get criticized for my “lack” of time management skills by friends who do not understand what I am doing with my time. After all, all I do is “memorize lines and stuff.” Or, there is always the argument that, because I actually enjoy my major and what it entails, it does not count as “real work.” It is astounding how often I must defend myself against peers who claim that Musical Theatre isn’t an “academic” major. However, despite what my peers and Governor Patrick McCrory might believe, research has shown that graduates with experience in liberal arts and arts in general are actually the most sought after by employers.

First, the common misconception that theatre majors will be waiting tables for the rest of their lives is quite inaccurate. According to Berrett (2011), “graduates of arts programs are likely to find jobs and satisfaction, even if they won't necessarily get wealthy in the process -- according to a new national survey of more than 13,000 alumni of 154 different arts programs.” So, even though there may be fewer job openings for actors than there are for engineers or mathematicians, there is absolutely no reason to brand theatre or liberal arts as “useless” majors. Not only do graduates of arts programs seem to be more satisfied with their jobs and professions,

research shows that members of the liberal arts are actually extremely appealing to employers. An article by Velasco (2012) explored the skills and attributes that current job market employers most frequently seek in new hires. The research showed that it was not vocational skills or grades that drew the attention of companies, it was the soft skills such as communication and personality. According to the article, “good academic records only matter in the public sector.” The article explored many factors, and focused on the concept of person-organization fit, which can be defined as “the degree of congruence or match between a person and the organization” (Velasco, 2012). Surprisingly, the results showed that employers do not frequently focus heavily on an employee’s educational background and history, but instead focus on their personality and their ability to communicate and problem solve.

So, what does this have to do with liberal arts education? Seifert et al. (2008), when discussing the results and components of liberal arts, explained that “the more cognitively-oriented liberal arts outcomes include moral reasoning, effective reasoning and problem solving, and the inclination to inquire and lifelong learning.” Research has shown that this is exactly what employers are looking for.

Governor Patrick McCrory’s argument that jobs are acquired through the thorough knowledge of a single discipline is actually quite inaccurate when you look at our current job economy. Yes, it is true that engineering and mathematics are in high demand, but what about all of the other positions? According to a survey of 225 employers, companies are actually seeking graduates of liberal arts programs almost as frequently as they seek out engineers or computer technicians for internship programs. Yes, the sciences are in the lead with 34% of companies seeking them, but the arts are actually the second most sought after majors with 30% of companies seeking to employ them (Huffington Post, 2012). Additionally, Lisa Levenstein

(2013) makes a valid point, “Business leaders repeatedly emphasize their need for employees who know how to analyze problems, think critically, write and speak effectively, and adapt to changing circumstances. These transferrable skills are precisely what students learn when they study the liberal arts.” These skills are not only learned in the liberal arts, they are also acquired and strengthened through a major in theatre.

As a senior, I am constantly confronted with the ominous thought of having to face the world on my own. What if I don’t get into graduate school? What if nobody wants to hire me? What if I have wasted the last four years of my life? I have been rather panic –stricken about explaining my background to potential employers, especially those outside of theatre. However, with a little help from statistics and research, I have become much less stressed about finding a job after graduation. According to Forbes (2012), there are ten specific skills that will help you get hired. The top five are critical thinking, complex problem solving, judgment and decision making, active listening, and computers and electronics. With all of the articles claiming that engineers were the only hireable employees, this list came as quite a shock. However, the article explains that “learning a technology is the easy part. Having the mindset to apply it, having the mindset and logic to process it, being thorough and detail-oriented while doing so, these are the critical skills.” Angela Rose (2011) discovered a slightly different list of eight skills, all of which are similar to the abilities on Forbes’ list. Her list includes confidence, willingness to listen and learn, adaptability, flexibility, self-reliance, teamwork, dependability, and honesty. Lucky for me, my education in theatre has prepared me with all of these skills.

Since freshman year, I have definitely made my way up the theatre department food chain. First semester, I started off as a lowly dresser on costume crew, and, by senior year, I was taking on the role of Assistant Director and planning my own independent project. The last four

years have been full of excitement, frustration, pure joy, and a pretty steep learning curve at times. But, all in all, my training in musical theatre gave me a plethora of skills pertinent to having a successful career. Let's explore Rose's list of traits within the context of theatre.

First, theatre gave me an appreciation for hard work and long hours. During productions, it is necessary to juggle academics, time needed for the production, and other responsibilities. During *Next to Normal* my senior year, I was light crew head for the production, and encountered an abundance of stalls and challenges. It was not uncommon during the final weeks of the production to find me and my crew working in the theatre for eight hours at a time, on top of dealing with everything else going on. My undergraduate career demands strong time management skills and multi-tasking. This enables me to be dependable. It would be very easy to just take a day off during a busy week. However, because of my experience, I understand that being professional means being responsible for your responsibilities.

Second, theatre enabled me to communicate with a variety of personalities in many different situations. This helped me with two of Rose's important traits: willingness to listen and learn, and teamwork. In our department, we have over forty people working in very close proximity with each other, and we all have very different temperaments. As president of Alpha Psi Omega, the theatre honor society, I was able to grow as a leader and develop the skills needed to effectively lead a group of people. According to Dr. Mark Lester (2012), the Skill Model of Leadership suggests that leaders require three primary skills: problem solving, social judgment, and knowledge. As a problem solver, I had to not only construct a solution, but had to communicate it in a way that made sense to the society. Social judgment involves empathy for the problems of the group, understanding the needs of others, adaptability, and persuasion. Finally, knowledge is the ability to repeat things that worked in the past. This construct of

leadership embraces many of the traits that Angela Rose lists, but primarily it focuses on the importance of willingness to listen and learn, as well as teamwork. It would have been much simpler to rule as a dictator and not listen to the members of the department, but by following the Skill Model of Leadership, I was able to develop many beneficial skills. Dealing with diverse collections of people can be frustrating at times; however, theatre taught me to adapt, and appreciate the strengths and weaknesses of others.

An experience that displays how theatre majors must be flexible and adaptable is our recent E-Term Project *TOMMY*. Over the course of three weeks, the department produced a full-length musical. This incredible feat could not have happened if the cast and crew were not flexible and adaptable. My own experience with *TOMMY* was probably a bit more hectic than most. As Assistant Director it eventually became my job to deal with anything that was not being done by someone else. Some days this meant fostering communication between crews, other days it meant painting a mural. Every morning I woke up to the thought of “what on earth am I going to do today?” If I would have been hard set in my ways and unable to adapt to change, there is no way I could have survived. While my leadership position provided me with an extensive amount of experience dealing with various situations, the constant evolution of the process is really what stretched me the most.

As an actor, there are many skills needed that most people would not expect. For example, honesty. Most people assume that actors are good liars, and that we merely pretend for a living. In my opinion, this is terribly far from the truth. In every single acting class I have taken I have heard the words “keep it honest.” Actors are expected to listen carefully and respond in a way that is genuine, not faked. This can be challenging. Actors are encouraged to make bold choices and to go after what the characters want, not to pretend or to “play for

laughs.” This is hardly lying. The ability to truly understand what a character wants and to 100% listen to a scene partner is invaluable, and can definitely be translated into everyday situations. The honesty that actors engage in is something that employers look for in future employees. Also, the capability to truly participate in active listening creates such a healthy and nurturing form of communication that actors definitely have the most mature set of soft skills.

Finally, Angela Rose (2011) discusses confidence and self-reliability, which go hand in hand. Confidence is the ability for people to be comfortable with themselves and to be more concerned with a problem at hand than with their own behavior or appearance. Theatre is the perfect tool to help someone achieve a level of confidence. For example, Cohen (2001) suggests that actors do numerous exercises to reduce self-consciousness. He says that to avoid self-consciousness you must do something “with a purpose that extends beyond yourself... you are pursuing a goal and struggling against an obstacle.” This can be employed in everyday life. If a person is able to focus on a task at hand and minimize self-consciousness, they will then develop more confidence. Only once a person has a solid sense of confidence can they have real self-reliability. Angela Rose says that self-reliability is the ability to take initiative and not be reliant on the affirmations of others. Theatre teaches students how to become more confident in their bold choices, and gives them the reinforcement to make their own decisions.

This list of eight traits is only one example of the benefits that come from theatre. Another trait that is frequently sought by business is critical thinking. According to Baker and Baker (2012), “critical thinking and creative thinking are related: Both involve the kind of purposeful, reasoned thinking that is needed to effectively assess information, solve problems, and make decisions.” But how does one learn how to think creatively or critically? Baker says that “abundant empirical evidence indicates that exposure to different viewpoints can improve

problem solving and increases the likelihood of creative activity.” Theatre is a perfect way to be exposed to different viewpoints.

For every show that I have been in or directed, I have had to put myself in the shoes of someone quite different from me. For example, when playing Wendla in *Spring Awakening*, I had to deal with numerous challenges as an actor including a difference in age, a difference in life experiences, and a difference in culture. Wendla was born in the late 1800’s in Germany when the discussion of sex was a very taboo subject. While much of the show is still very pertinent today, I had to analyze how Wendla would have dealt with the situations, not how I would have handled them. While I might have met a new experience with excitement and vigor, Wendla was more careful and uncertain. I had to learn to respect this and think creatively about how she would deal with new scenarios. In the past I have played a young Jewish immigrant, a hippie, a seedy cabaret performer, and an insecure young woman trying to become a star. None of these characters were anything like myself, and none of these characters were like each other. Each semester I am exposed to different viewpoints because every semester, I have to become someone else. Every day I have to think creatively.

Another way theatre builds beneficial traits such as adaptability, teamwork, and creativity is through the use of improvisation. When improvising, actors are expected to work together to create a new scene. They must, on the spot, create something completely organic and honest while working as a team. A useful tactic that has been incorporated into the business setting is the concept of “yes-and”. As described by Vera and Crossan (2005) “to *yes-and* means that actors accept the offer made to them and build on it.” So, for example, if during a scene, a participant exclaims “Oh no, the whole room is on fire! Aren’t you getting hot?” The scene partner might respond, “*Yes, and* we should probably call the fire department!” Not only is the

player accepting the situation that has been given to them, but they have also offered a creative addition to the context. This exercise is perfect for fostering employees' creativity and divergent thinking. If businesses are already engaging in these practices at work, think how enthused they will be to have an employee who is already familiar and comfortable with thinking outside of the box.

As you can see, theatre and the liberal arts provide a plethora of ways for an individual to become a desirable candidate for any position. Whether it is based on soft skills such as the ability to communicate effectively and honestly, or the ability to apply critical thinking, theatre is a jumping off point for successful and motivated students. So, if you want to get hired, do not pursue a degree in something just because you think it will get you hired. Stretch yourself. If you pursue a degree in theatre you will gain skills that cannot be taught in a classroom. You will gain experience dealing with situations that can only arise from hands-on interaction.

As a senior, I now recognize that theatre is not just about being the lead in a show or getting the best crew position. It is about much more. It is about making yourself invaluable in everything that you do. It is about gaining skills that deal with something much deeper than a computer program. Anyone can learn how to use technology, but it takes a well-versed creative thinker to solve the real problems. For the last four years, I have not only used my knowledge of theatre, but have developed strong leadership skills, self-motivation, and a knack for creative problem solving. While some people might find my undergraduate degree to be "useless" or unorthodox, I have no doubt that my experiences as a theatre major will in fact be beneficial and will not land me a job as your waiter.

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