Abolish the Business Major!

Anti-intellectual degree programs have no place in colleges.

Chronicle illustration, Getty Images

August 13, 2019

By Johann N. Neem

Business is now the largest undergraduate major in the United States. On the face of it, that seems rational. Declining public funding has made college more expensive and has forced students to think about their education as an economic investment. Colleges, in turn, treat students as customers.

Yet the growth of the business major inflicts a significant cost on colleges and the students they serve. In an era in which calls to reform higher education are rampant, eliminating the undergraduate business major is one simple reform that would dramatically benefit both colleges and their students. While this change would not require the kind of disruption reformers sometimes seek, it would improve student learning outcomes and refocus colleges on their core mission.

Many of the students choosing to major in business and related degrees presumably believe it will lead to higher salaries. Policy makers, too, have started to evaluate majors — and even colleges — by their graduates' salaries. There are good reasons to question the legitimacy of this exercise. As the former Rochester Institute of Technology president Bill Destler put it (https://www.huffpost.com/entry/the-presidents-new-higher_b_3860804), measuring colleges by

gainful employment upon graduation." But even if we accept future salaries as justification for certain degree programs, does the business major perform as undergraduates expect?

Some states now track their college graduates' earnings. For example, the University of Texas system tracks (https://seekut.utsystem.edu/) five-year median wages for its graduates. At UT-Arlington in 2018, the five-year median wage for business-administration and management majors was $53,715, and it was $52,863 for marketing, compared with $48,854 for history, $46,813 for English, $71,530 for chemistry, and $53,197 for biology.

> *Mission creep has turned colleges into curricular shopping malls.*

Researchers at the Georgetown University Center for Education and the Workforce found (https://cew.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/whatsitworth-select.pdf) that for students without a graduate degree, median income for business majors was $60,000, compared with $59,000 for the physical sciences, $55,000 for the social sciences, $50,000 for biology and the life sciences, and $47,000 for the humanities. The American Academy of Arts & Sciences' Humanities Indicators found (https://www.humanitiesindicators.org/content/indicatorDoc.aspx?i=64) that the median income for business majors with a terminal bachelor's degree in 2012 was around

Yet other studies complicate the story. *The Chronicle*'s 2014 Almanac concluded (https://www-chronicle-com.ccl.idm.oclc.org/article/Pay-for-Liberal-Arts-Graduates/147311) that preprofessional majors initially make more than academic majors, but that by midcareer the gap has largely been erased. The Hamilton Project found (https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/storyline/wp/2014/09/29/want-proof-college-is-worth-it-look-at-this-list-of-the-highest-paying-majors/?utm_term=.5ee34199c74f) almost no difference in median lifetime earnings between chemistry, political science, marketing, and business management and administration majors. An analysis by the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) concluded (https://www.aacu.org/leap/economiccase) that over one's career, median annual earnings for humanities majors and professional/preprofessional majors are almost exactly the same, whereas majors in the sciences and mathematics tend to make more. At their peak earnings, humanities majors, the study found, make more than professional/preprofessional majors.

Most majors cluster around a common range. A Payscale study found (http://online.wsj.com/public/resources/documents/info-Degrees_that_Pay_you_Back-sort.html) midcareer median salaries for business majors at $72,100, compared to $98,600 for economics, $71,000 for history, $64,700 for English, $81,200 for philosophy, and $97,300 for physics. At the 75th percentile, the midcareer median salary for business majors

for English, $103,000 for history, $127,000 for philosophy, and $132,000 for physics. For highly paid positions, the arts and sciences do as well as business.

In reality, the difference between most majors may be within the margin of error for many studies, and gender may shape future earnings more than college major. As Benjamin Schmidt noted (https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/08/the-humanities-face-a-crisisof-confidence/567565/), "the difference between humanities majors and science majors, in median income and unemployment, seems to be no more than the difference between residents of Virginia and North Carolina. If someone told to me not to move to Charlotte because no one there can make a living, I would never take them seriously. But worried relatives express the same concerns about classics majors every day, with no sounder evidence."

The data are not only contradictory, but also messy. It's not clear, for example, whether majoring in business leads to higher salaries, or whether other factors are more important. For example, because business programs are better integrated with the business community, they offer their students greater access to internships and employers. The most important complicating factor, however, is self-selection. All undergraduates at UT-Arlington, for example, may be academically capable, but those who choose to major

in business probably see their education primarily as a way to get ahead. Their own desires and aspirations may matter more than their major.

The same, it should be added, may be true of students majoring in the arts and sciences. They may choose nonvocational majors because they are interested in doing work that produces social value or greater personal satisfaction even if it does not maximize their income. Thus, less than 40 percent of business majors report (https://www.amacad.org/sites/default/files/academy/multimedia/pdfs/publications/researchpapersmonographs/HI_Workforce-2018.pdf) that they had enough money to "do everything I want to do," compared with 45 percent of graduates in the natural sciences and 42 percent of graduates in the humanities. Moreover, when asked about how satisfied they are with their work, humanities majors were in every measure (opportunities to advance, salary, benefits, job security, and job location) within a handful of percentage points of degree holders in other fields.

The evidence suggests there is no reason to believe majoring in the liberal arts and sciences will have a negative impact on earning potential. Indeed, majoring in the arts and sciences may actually improve graduates' prospects. According to an AAC&U study (https://www.aacu.org/sites/default/files/files/LEAP/2013_EmployerSurvey.pdf), employers overwhelmingly desire

college students with a liberal education, both for the kinds of knowledge and perspectives such an education offers and because of the higher-end skills it develops.

Employers have been saying this for a long time (https://www-cornellpress-cornell-edu.ccl.idm.oclc.org/book/9781501742071/nothing-succeeds-like-failure/). Back in 1953, John L. McCaffrey, who was then president of International Harvester, stated that a business graduate's perspective tends to be too narrow, and therefore he "does not see overall effects on the business." McCaffrey encouraged engineering and technical schools "to give a larger part in their courses to the liberal-arts subjects" because business leaders needed a "rounded education."

In 1960, William Benton, a partner in an advertising firm, admitted that as "a student at Yale forty years ago, I specialized in a mishmash labeled 'Finance' — to my everlasting regret." Business programs "too often are a waste — of time, money, and the priceless opportunity to prepare for successful careers." Instead, students should take "concentrated doses of English, mathematics, the natural sciences, history, psychology, economics and the humanities." For Benton, "even four years of Latin are more useful than a once-over-lightly course in production or merchandising."

This leads to the second major weakness of the undergraduate business degree: It is less likely to foster the skills that employers value. In

sociologists Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa found that students taking courses in the arts and sciences produce significantly greater gains in critical thinking (as measured by the Collegiate Learning Assessment) than do business majors. They attribute the result to the fact that students in the sciences study the most hours, and students in the humanities read and write the most.

In their follow-up book, *Aspiring Adults Adrift* (University of Chicago Press, 2014), Arum and Roksa acknowledge that the data are messy. Students move between majors quite a bit, and a good part of the difference may have to do with differences between selective and less-selective institutions. Finally, because of self-selection, students who are academically weak probably opt out of arts and sciences majors. Nonetheless, the authors' original finding held.

One of *Academically Adrift*'s conclusions is that colleges with a campus culture of achievement tend to produce better results. Presumably, as colleges once again gain clarity of purpose by abandoning the mission creep that has turned them into curricular shopping malls, campuses will again emphasize the core virtues of intellectual inquiry and academic achievement.

The third, and most important, reason to abandon the business major is because business majors are antithetical to college education and unworthy of a college degree *even if* it could be proved that they do produce higher salaries. College students ought to study the liberal arts and sciences because

necessary both for preparing people to be effective citizens and leaders and productive participants in the work force, as well as to further their own learning. While there may be utilitarian arguments for majoring in business, colleges must remain true to their own internal purposes.

> *Undergraduate business majors are not just ineffective — they are unethical.*

American colleges have historically been exceptional in their desire to offer every student a liberal education. Today, many policy makers are asking whether the liberal arts are relevant for the 21st century. Increasingly, a liberal education is a luxury good — some liberal arts colleges now even brand their programs as "boutique (https://www.aacu.org/liberaleducation/2014/fall/cohen)" products for privileged students.

Ultimately, then, the reason to abandon business degrees is because college is not for anything and everything. A college graduate ought to be a different kind of person than someone who did not attend college. The issue is not just skills, but character. It is not about being for or against business, but rather about ensuring the specific kinds of education that a college degree should represent. A good college education offers access to the knowledge requisite to be a thoughtful interpreter of the world, fosters the academic skills necessary to develop meaningful interpretations on one's own, and cultivates intellectual virtues (https://www.chronicle

Think/230965). In other words, college is defined by its content — by the kinds of things that one ought to think about.

The business major is for students who want a college degree without a college education. The philosopher Tal Brewer has written (http://www.caaaup.org/blog/philosopher-talbot-brewer-on-the-corporate-managerial-take-over-of-the-university) that the very notion of business school is an "oxymoron." The word "scholar" derives from the Greek word for leisure. Colleges are places where people step aside from the world of need — from the world of business — to engage in reflection. "Devoted to discussion and thought unfolding under its own internal demands," a college cannot with integrity offer "training for the sort of life that has no place for such thought." Business schooling is "a *scholé* of the negation of *scholé*."

Business is an activity that we engage in to achieve other goods. A college graduate must be educated to think about those goods thoughtfully and critically, especially because markets are cultural institutions, shaped by what we value. But the very existence of the business major teaches students that the end of business is business. In reality, each good or service has its own distinct purposes, practices, and virtues.

To reduce this beautiful complexity to questions of maximizing profit or creating efficient supply chains confuses means with ends. The end of farming is to produce healthy food. The end of building cars is to produce

economy, farming and automobile production need to remain viable, but farms and automobile companies don't exist primarily to enrich shareholders but to produce value for our society. Students need to think about the specific goods they produce — their social value, their history, and the ways in which they are part of a larger culture.

Eliminating the undergraduate business major will allow colleges to focus once again on what college is for. As William Deresiewicz has written (https://newrepublic.com/article/118747/ivy-league-schools-are-overrated-send-your-kids-elsewhere), elite colleges "boast that they teach their students how to think, but all they mean is that they train them in the analytic and rhetorical skills that are necessary for success in business and the professions." Ending the business major will not solve this problem, but it will create the space to do so by eliminating the need for the arts and sciences to compete on business majors' terms and instead to concentrate on the specific goods and practices that they stand for.

This is a fundamental problem that cannot be fixed simply by offering business degrees with a "liberal arts twist," as one news story suggested (https://www.usnews.com/education/best-colleges/articles/2015/09/09/business-schools-give-undergraduate-programs-a-liberal-arts-twist), because, by treating business as an end in itself — by making it a major — we allow college students' self-formation to be shaped by the

We must care about what students attend to during their time in college, and from this perspective undergraduate business majors are not just ineffective but unethical.

Undergraduate business programs are anti-intellectual in an institution whose purpose is intellectual. They do not necessarily lead to higher salaries; they produce lower student-learning outcomes; and they are ultimately in tension with the ethical and intellectual purposes of collegiate education. That is why, at the end of the day, there is no justification for undergraduate business majors.

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