

## The Myth of the Straight Line

Support for public universities has declined dramatically over the last three decades. In 2012, Illinois State received 25% of its revenue from the state, down from 61% in 1987, a decline of 36 percentage points, with another cut looming. Most state universities across the nation tell a similar story. The American Council on Education has stated that the contributions of one state, Colorado, will be down to zero by 2022 if it stays on its current path.

There are several reasons for these declines, but one is a basic change in the way many view the purpose of higher education. As Ellen Schrecker of Yeshiva University stated in a recent article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, "Higher education has come to be considered an individual benefit rather than a common good." State governments' adoption of the idea that education is an individual benefit has led them to transfer the expense to students and their families.

The founders of our oldest universities, and of our nation (Thomas Jefferson is a fine example of both) believed that education was necessary for a healthy democracy. That attitude has largely been replaced by one that says that a university should prepare young people not for life in a democratic society, but for a good job. In today's economy, we completely understand the concern that students and their families have over finding a job, but we worry about the idea that job preparation is the only purpose of higher education.

This change in attitude has led to the devaluing of certain academic fields. Those that appear to lead directly to a certain kind of job are favored over those that do not. In fact, a broad liberal arts education provides students with skills necessary in many jobs – critical thinking, communication, adaptability, and a knowledge of successes and failures in the past.

Any major in the liberal arts will prepare students with these skills, but the devaluing of many of these fields, such as history, literature, or philosophy, comes about because of what we are calling the "Myth of the Straight Line." This is the idea that a major is valuable only if a particular job can be identified as the end point. If you graduate with a degree in philosophy, but don't have a job called "philosopher" lined up, you've wasted your time. But who among us can draw a straight line between our youth and our work 20 or 30 years later? Life constantly throws challenges and opportunities in our paths that change the course of our work and our lives. If you don't see a straight line right now from a degree to a job, don't be discouraged, your future will have endless possibilities, and you'll be prepared for them.

Last spring, the College of Arts and Sciences at Illinois State inducted into its Hall of Fame an alumna who recently retired as a high-ranking judge, first in the U.S. Army, and next in the U.S. Court of Federal Claims. She required a law degree, of course, to pursue those jobs, but by her own words, it was what she learned as a double major in philosophy and political science that guided her work on the bench. She cites the understanding of human relationships and the "mental gymnastics" required to succeed in those disciplines as affecting her performance more than anything else.

The popularity of different majors rises and falls over time for a variety of reasons. Journalism was a hugely popular major in the years following Watergate, much less so now. This will always happen, but the institutionalized devaluing of certain disciplines due to perceptions of employability strikes us as very harmful, not just to those fields, but to our nation.

We pay taxes for the public support of many things that may not provide personal benefit to us. Our taxes support municipal golf courses, whether we golf or not. In this sense, we have no personal stake in golf courses. Our lives are not changed when our neighbor's golf game improves. Our lives can be changed, however, by a total stranger's acquisition of knowledge. We all have a stake in the growth of knowledge, which is the true business of the university, and should be recognized as such.

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