



GUTENBERG COLLEGE

McKENZIE STUDY CENTER • ART PROJECT

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Why A Great Books Education Is The Most Practical!

by David Crabtree

Gutenberg College is a great books college. The curriculum is designed to develop good learning skills in students; they read and then discuss in small groups the writings produced by the greatest minds of Western culture as they grappled with the most fundamental questions facing human beings of all ages. When I tell people about Gutenberg College, one of the most common responses is: "It's a good idea, but not practical." The thinking seems to be that if one had unlimited time and money, a great books education would be very good to pursue; but in the real world, food has to be put on the table, and a great books education will not do that. I am convinced, however, that a great books education is not only practical, but, in our day and age, the most practical education available.

Modern society has adopted the historically recent perspective that the purpose of education is training for the workplace. In this view, college should provide students with skills and knowledge that will prepare them to procure reasonably high-paying, satisfying employment for the rest of their lives. The common wisdom says that the best way to achieve this goal is: first, as an undergraduate, select a promising occupation and major in the appropriate field of study; and second, after graduating, enter directly into the work force or attend a graduate or professional school for more specialized training. The logic seems to be that the sooner one concludes one's education and begins work in one's field, the less will be the cost of education and the better the prospects for advancement into secure, high-paying positions. While this was once a reasonable strategy, it is not suited to the economic environment currently developing.

The world is changing at a bewildering pace. Anyone who owns a computer and tries to keep up with the developments in hardware, software, and the accompanying incompatibilities is all too aware of the speed of change. This rapid change, especially technological change, has extremely important implications for the job market.

In the past, it was possible to look at the nation's work force, determine which of the existing occupations was most desirable in terms of pay and working conditions, and pick one to prepare for. But the rapid rate of change is clouding the crystal ball. How do we know that a high paying job today will be high paying tomorrow?

A photographer told me about a talented and highly skilled artisan who touched up photographs. He was the best in our region of the country, and people knew it; because the demand for his

skill was so great, he was unable to keep up with the work. A few years ago, however, this artisan suddenly closed his shop; he did not have enough work to stay in business. Due to developments in computer hardware and software, anyone with just a little training can now achieve results previously attainable by only a few highly skilled artisans. Technology had rendered this artisan's skills obsolete. And this is not an isolated case; technology is antiquating many skills.

One could try to avoid this fate by finding an occupation unlikely to be automated, but automation is not the only cause of job elimination. Historically, mid-management positions in large corporations provided good incomes and considerable job security. However, AT&T's recent layoffs have drawn attention to the growing trend in American companies to eliminate mid-level managers as the companies restructure to compete better in the world market. As a result, a glut of unemployed executives are having great difficulty finding employment in their field of expertise. Most of them never dreamed they would be standing in unemployment lines.

Medicine might be a more promising field. There will always be sick people to treat, and doctors have a reputation for high pay. However, recent news reports have called into question the future of this occupation. There is an excess of doctors in the United States right now, largely due to the number of foreign medical students who decide to remain in this country after they complete their training. And physicians' incomes recently declined for the first time in decades, a change attributed to the proliferation of HMOs and managed health care providers--a trend expected to continue. To further complicate the picture, in the near future a national health care plan may rise from the ashes of President Clinton's ill-fated one. What effect such a program would have on physicians' incomes and working conditions is impossible to predict with certainty, but doctors ought not expect raises under such a plan. In light of such an uncertain future, should a student invest the time and money medical training requires? This is a tough question, but similar uncertainties lie in the future of many professions.

One could forego the traditionally desirable occupations and choose a field certain to grow and develop. Clearly the high demand for programmers, electrical engineers, and computer programmers appears to hold great promise for job security in the foreseeable future, even if one must work for several different employers over the years. However, no one in this field will be able to take his job for granted. Due to the rapid rate of technological change in the computer industry, people in this field need to be constantly learning and updating their skills to keep up with the new technology. In areas of state-of-the-art development, some companies do not want software writers or engineers over thirty-five years old because their training is out-of-date and they are too set in their ways to approach problems with fresh thinking. These companies prefer to replace older employees with recent graduates. Thus the longevity of one's career in this fast changing field could be relatively short.

No matter what occupation one chooses, the future is full of question marks. Although this economic dislocation is in its early stages, statistics already indicate a high degree of instability in the job market. According to the United States government, the average American switches careers three times in his or her life, works for ten employers, and stays in each job only 3.6 years. (Note 1)

Such unpredictability calls for a different strategy in preparing for the job market. Rather than spending one's undergraduate years receiving specialized training, one ought to learn more general, transferable skills which will provide the flexibility to adjust to whatever changes may occur. A well-educated worker should be able to communicate clearly with co-workers, both verbally and in writing, read with understanding, perform basic mathematical calculations, conduct himself responsibly and ethically, and work well with others. These skills would make a person well-suited to most work environments and capable of learning quickly and easily the requisite skills for a new career, should the need arise. Thus a hard-headed realism, with long-term economic security as the goal, would seem to dictate an undergraduate educational strategy of focusing on sound general learning skills--just what a great books education provides.

Therefore, a great books education makes good sense in terms of dollars spent and dollars gained when calculated over a lifetime, and, therefore, good training for the workplace. This is fortuitous, however, because a great books education is not designed with this as the primary goal. It is designed to achieve the even more practical goal historically assigned to education: to teach students how to live wisely. I say this is practical because that which helps one achieve what needs to be done is practical. Living wisely is the most important thing a person can do in his lifetime. Therefore, education with this focus is quintessentially practical.

Wise living means to live as one ought; in other words, to strive to achieve good goals by moral means. This statement immediately evokes an array of fundamental questions: Why are we here? What is valuable or worthwhile? What are the principles of right and wrong? Is there a God? Who is He? What is my relationship to Him? Without having seriously wrestled with these issues, one will be condemned to a life without direction or purpose. Without clearly defined and worthwhile goals, success and fulfillment are impossible. Therefore, one's answers to these questions have very important implications for how one chooses to earn a living.

Is such a goal realistic or attainable by education? It is difficult to teach a person how to live wisely. In a sense, such a skill can not be taught; it can only be learned. The student must be challenged to think through these fundamental questions for himself; he must be an extremely active participant in his own education. We all derive our wisdom from careful reflection on our experience, and this reflection can be made more profound by considering the reflections of others who have had similar experiences. That is to say, we can benefit from the wisdom others have attained.

A great books education creates an educational environment conducive to the learning of wisdom. Classes are small, personal, and largely discussion based. The small class size and the discussion format encourage each student to be actively involved in consideration of important issues, and they allow the course of the discussion to be tailored to the concerns of the students. The writings of the most influential thinkers of our cultural tradition are studied, which provides many thought-provoking insights into the fundamental questions. As students work to understand these writings, they develop important learning skills--reading with understanding, thinking clearly, and writing cogently--which equip them to become life-long learners.

A great books education is not for everyone. In order to benefit from such an education, a student has to be highly motivated, mature enough to realize the importance of such a focus, and self-

disciplined. Whatever reasons one might have for not pursuing a great books education, it can not be because it is not practical!

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Note 1: Sue Brower, "When You Want-or Have-to Make a Career Shift." *Cosmopolitan*, v. 199, no. 2 (Aug 1985), p. 229.

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