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Education and the Job Market

Every time the job market stiffens we face an argument concerning the relationship between education and employment, and whether our young people are being properly trained for the existing job opportunities. In this debate, it usually is general education or "liberal arts" that takes a beating. Part of the problem stems from inflated expectations brought on by a strong job market in recent years. In the 1940's and 1950's, no one expected a student to receive more than one or two job offers, and the mathematics graduate who ended up in retailing seldom felt betrayed by his alma mater. But the frantic recruiting of the 1960's gave rise to expectations of plentiful opportunities within nearly every chosen field. When these opportunities abruptly declined, the clamor began.

The critics of educational institutions ignored the fact that unemployment was more related to widespread economic malaise than to inadequate or inappropriate education. Some critics even suggested that manpower training and vocational-technical education ought to be the *paramount* responsibilities of colleges and universities. From a statistical point of view, such arguments were less than compelling. Between 1960 and 1970, jobs requiring professional and technical higher education increased 49 percent, while demand for "craftsmen and foremen" increased only 19 percent and nonfarm labor less than 5 percent.

Educational institutions have been providing as many or more career-training curricula than ever, but they cannot impose upon students particular courses of study, nor can they predict what the job opportunities will be 4 or 6 years after the student first enrolls.

The way out of our present troubles lies first in breaking down the false dichotomy according to which general and career education are seen as mutually exclusive. In fact, the two are complementary. Second, we must recognize that the development of lifelong education relaxes the constraints on time. Desired combinations of vocational and general education cannot be limited to a 4-year undergraduate period but can be decided in the context of education over a lifetime.

The case for general education is usually based on its great humanistic benefits—its capacity to give us a sense of place within our cultural heritage, while the benefits of career education are usually regarded as material gains. Yet, in a fundamental sense, general education itself is a crucial sort of job preparation.

In the United States there has long been a high degree of movement between jobs that are significantly different in nature, as in the case of the engineer who enters management. The career skills a man or woman learns prior to accepting a first or second position may be inadequate for a third, fourth, or fifth job.

General education, concentrating on developing a broad cultural perspective, analytic abilities, and communicative skills, enriches our personal lives and enhances our adaptability to new situations. Thus general education is as indispensable to the world of work as any program of vocational training.

I argue for the ascendancy of neither general nor career education. Only a dual approach can serve our purposes—a partnership operating within a context of continuing educational participation by people of all ages, each involved in the kinds of learning experiences appropriate to their various needs. In our future educational strategies, general education and career education must join together, lest either, in standing alone, prove an unfortunate societal liability.—CLIFTON R. WHARTON, *President, Michigan State University, East Lansing 48824*