College Should Be About Learning: 'Earning Power' Comes With Success in Any Major
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I have to admit the list of top paying college majors featured recently in a broad array of media outlets, including The Huffington Post, makes interesting reading. But for most students, choosing a major -- or even a college -- based solely on earnings expectations is a big mistake.

Sure, some students are truly interested in petroleum engineering and have an aptitude for that type of career. Many more, however, may feel pressured in this economy to select a "top-paying major" that doesn't really suit them. Students who choose majors based on earnings power may be setting themselves on a path to discontent and frustration.

A much better approach is for students to set a course based on subjects that truly interest them. Choosing a major is a personal decision based on subjects that match a student's interests, aptitudes and personality.

The global economy is changing so rapidly that some of the specific jobs college students are training for today won't exist in another decade or two. Other students will eventually take jobs that don't exist today and some professions will see a radical change in earning power. There's no question that job destruction and creation will only increase in the years to come. Today, the job market includes a number of jobs that didn't exist 10 years ago, such as sustainability manager, social media strategist, blogger, patient advocate and more. How do you choose a major -- or a college -- that will prepare you for a job or career that hasn't been thought of yet?

For most students, the best way to learn the broad skills every employer looks for in a job candidate is to get an education in the liberal arts. Not only will you be prepared with strong communication and analytical skills, you also will excel at solving problems and bringing seemingly unrelated thoughts and ideas together. The key to the liberal arts is your ability to learn, even learning to determine what you don't know but need to know. As the rate of change continues to advance, your ability to learn is critical to your professional success.

A recent survey of employers conducted by Hart Research Associates for the Association of American Colleges and Universities found employers consider the essential learning outcomes of a liberal arts education to be what their companies need to be successful today.

With a strong liberal arts college -- where the educational programs are properly constructed -- there is value in any major you choose. I was a history major at my undergraduate institution, and in today's environment people might ask, "What are you going to do with a degree in that?" My degree in history took me to the Peace Corps and to leadership positions on Wall Street and in higher education.

Many successful senior executives come from a wide variety of majors. They used their college years to learn how to take advantage of professional opportunities and to develop the skills to navigate this complex world.

During the college search process, students and parents will be better served if they look for colleges with rigorous academics and a strong support system that connects student learning to real-world experiences. This approach is more complex than simply searching for schools that offer a petroleum engineering major, but will result in a far better fit for most students.

The college search process can seem overwhelming at first. Students want to know if they will be comfortable socially, if the college has majors they are interested in, if there are clubs and activities they can be involved in. Parents want to know their students will get a comprehensive education, that they will thrive and be safe and that they will be well-prepared for whatever path they choose after they graduate.

As you visit college campuses and ask questions about the educational programs and campus life, don't forget to ask how the institution prepares graduates for life after college. What programs are in place to guide students through their four years and help them transition into a profession, graduate school or other post-graduate fellowships or service opportunities?

Some questions I recommend you ask all colleges include:

- What kind of alumni network do you have and how involved are alumni with students?
- Are there mentoring programs that connect students to alumni in their fields of interest?
- Are there opportunities for internships and other experiences outside the classroom?
- What are the programs that help students find their first professional job? What is the support available to students who want to apply to various grad schools?
- Importantly, do the institution's graduates see value in their education? Do the schools survey their graduates to see how they are using their education and whether their experience was relevant to the career path they chose?
Too often these questions are left for the later part of the college career and that's a big mistake. Every student and parent should ask questions like these during the college visit. Don't wait until you are a college junior or senior to think about life after college. And, most importantly, don't make assumptions about majors or colleges based on today's earnings expectations.

When comparing schools, think carefully about the experiences you want to gain during your four-year college education and the rigor of the academic program, and also make sure you know what to expect from the institution to help you advance to the next stage of your life.