

God, Life, and Everything
"Career return on investment"

I read a recent article titled, "8 College Degrees with the Worst Return on Investment." I read it because I had this sneaking suspicion that I might find my degrees on that list.

The eight worst degrees were - in no particular order, since they all were equally poor - Sociology, Fine Arts, Education, Religion, Hospitality/Tourism, Nutrition, Psychology, and Communications/Journalism.

To give you an idea of how well I did, consider that my BA was in Journalism and German. My MA was in Education. Then, of course, I got an MDiv at seminary. It's like I hit the trifecta.

But let's ask what the study meant by "return on investment." Essentially, it means the difference between what you spend getting a degree and the earning potential for careers that require that degree. You spend all that money on college, you want to make some of it back so you don't spend the rest of your life paying off student loans.

I am sympathetic to the need for these considerations. Unlike when I was in school, college these days is much more expensive proportionately. That is, it takes a lot more money - adjusted for inflation - to go to college today than it did thirty years ago. Back then, my parents managed to put six kids through college (yes, we worked throughout, but they still had a significant role). I struggle with one in college and another starting next year.

Having said that, I bristle at the idea that a calling to ministry is a "return on investment." When did this become a business transaction?

I also bristle at the realization that nearly every one of these underpaid, undervalued degrees is for careers that are essential to humanity. Sociologists, who often go into social work and corrections, are essential to helping people navigate the legal and bureaucratic system. If you've ever been in a hospital, a social worker helps you get through the red tape. If you've ever had a loved one in a nursing home, a social worker helped get you that placement.

Think about the nutritionist - schools, nursing homes, hospitals, restaurants, food processing companies - they all need them. Too bad we don't think nutrition is important.

Another tremendously undervalued career is education. We regularly complain the country is not smart enough, but we constantly put down educators. We rail against tenure, claiming it protects lazy teachers who don't want to compete. We moan about school taxes. But if there is a more important career in this country, I don't know what it is. Without excellent education, we go down the tubes. The way we've cut education funding (or funneled it away from teachers into non-educational mandates), you'd think we didn't want a smart public.

Then there's journalism. Without good, smart journalists, we are an uninformed society. Journalists are necessary for filtering the flood of information - good from bogus - for a society that doesn't have time to research everything. That has been the sacred trust of the journalist, and I remember how seriously I took it when I wrote for our student newspaper. We did not print the views of everyone we interviewed, and if someone was lying or wrong, we said so. But even then, our professors warned that

corporate ownership of newspapers and television stations was changing things, and they weren't so sure it was worth going into.

The Fine Arts, which has seemingly always catered to the starving artist, is far more necessary to our society than one might think. Without the arts, a society is empty, soulless. The arts are music, beauty, humor, inspiration. Sure, a few movie stars make a lot of money, and so do producers, but they are very few, and the more corporate they become, the more they cater to the lowest common denominator ("reality" television).

As to hospitality, just try going to a hotel without their expertise. As to psychology - you thought they were loaded, didn't you? Their help for some people is life-saving.

And religion? It is absolutely true that I did not go into the ministry for the money. None of us do. But we also do some of society's heavy lifting. Today, I just buried a man. This month I've married a couple, visited the sick in the hospital, fed the hungry, worked with the youth, taught a class, led bible studies, preached and written, and so on. Those in the religious field are often the ones who bring injustice to the light of day. They remind society of the need for an inner life which is different from distraction. On the other hand, I will be the first to admit that of all the above careers, clergy generally get a lot of respect (at least on the superficial level).

It does bother me that the article seems to quantify the value of a particular education, a particular set of careers, as if they are less essential to society than, say, a lawyer (and I know many good and decent lawyers). It bothers me that those with the impulse to make society better will always do so knowing that by American measurements, they will always be undervalued.

The things we need to be a healthy society are the things we apparently don't care that much about.

How do we change this apathy? I don't know, but a good start might be changing the entire US approach to higher education. Where college is considered a right in nearly every other industrialized nation, costing very little or nothing at all, it is considered a business here. You have to have money to make money because even with academic scholarships, most students can not afford to study.

I know people say it costs money which usually means taxes, and taxation is a taboo in the US. But other countries have figured out how to educate their people while still having a high standard of living. Are we unable to? Or just unwilling?

For what it's worth, I would not change my degrees. And I'm proud of my son who is going into secondary education. But wouldn't it be nice if his intention to teach our country's children wasn't considered a losing proposition?