Students and their parents certainly deserve to know the worth of their investment in education. In defining worth, social scientists and policymakers typically use economic yardsticks, evaluating the outcomes of various college majors in terms of earnings and employment rates. However, different concepts of worth better align with our mission as educators, match what students want and graduates are satisfied with, and promote the nation’s economic health.

There are many other, perhaps better, ways to measure the value of a college education. We could, for example, rank majors and institutions by how well they impart critical or creative thinking skills, by their production of civic leaders or entrepreneurs, by student satisfaction, by whether alumni indicate that the skills they learned in college are relevant to their lives, or by whether they are satisfied with their careers and whether their jobs give them a sense of purpose. On this last point, recent research indicates that we might want to provide a truth-in-advertising label for families that are looking into the results of each major—something like “engineers, on average, earn more than performing artists, but performing artists, on average, are happier than engineers in their work.”

Which Majors Foster Resilience?

Our global economy, while creating expanded opportunity for many, also produces increased anxiety and stress related to job insecurity. Fewer people today can aspire to long-term careers in the same industry, let alone the same company or organization. According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, in 2010, men and women 18 to 44 years old had held on average 11 jobs, and a quarter had worked at 15 or more jobs.

Along with job insecurity, graduates must confront global migration, demographic change, market instability and decreased public services. These challenges take their toll on students’ mental health.

True to Garrison Keillor’s characterization of Lake Wobegon, where everyone is above average, freshman increasingly rate themselves as above average compared to their peers in academic skills, confidence, and leadership. Emotional health is the one area in which they see themselves as below average, with many more students reporting lower levels of emotional health and much higher levels of stress today than students of two decades ago.

The ability to act and think creatively is necessary to navigate such uncertain seas and to give graduates the
surprising that more than a quarter of undergraduates in our survey of academic majors report that they should get refunds for classes they don’t like.

But this one-dimensional conception of the value of a college education does not fit with how alumni themselves evaluate their degrees. Money is indeed one criterion they use to think about their success. For some majors, it may be the dominant criterion. For others, like those in the arts, financial considerations take a backseat to considerations such as personal satisfaction, the chance to be creative, and the ability to contribute to one’s community and to society.

And across all majors, according to our 2010 national survey, graduating seniors rank creativity, leadership, personal values, and family and work/life balance as more important than income when considering their futures. Given the diverse motivations and career aspirations of students, why do we insist on focusing on employment and income data?

Ironically, this focus may actually hurt the nation economically, in the long run. Research by the Federal Reserve Bank indicates that for tasks involving creativity and problem-solving, performance is driven by intrinsic motivation; higher financial incentives actually lead to worse performance. Moreover, there is considerable evidence (see Trilling & Fadel, Berman & Korsten, and Tepper in Resources) indicating that creativity and flexibility are what will allow the United States to compete in the global marketplace.

In fostering creativity in addition to value-driven, money-making behaviors, in short, we are preparing our students for what is very likely to be a turbulent future. Our 2010 national survey suggests that many of today’s young people “get it.” Eighty-four of students say that thinking creatively is “important” or “very important” (compared to 60 who say the same about solving quantitative problems), and 92 say that having a career that allows them to be creative is important.

Perhaps it is naïve to think that higher education can somehow sidestep the market logic that dominates the rest of our lives. And even as students report that creativity is important to them, about 81 percent of incoming freshmen continue to rank “being very well off financially” as an “essential” or “very important” life goal. But do college graduates—with some time, distance, and experience—see

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HIGHER EDUCATION FOR SALE

Still, researchers and journalists generally fall in line with the broader trend of assigning everything in life a market value. In *What Money Can’t Buy: The Moral Limits of Markets*, Michael J. Sandel illuminates the contours of a world in which pretty much everything is for sale.

People can buy their way into carpool lanes, even if they are driving alone; you can buy your way to the front of the line at concerts and movies; and corporations can sponsor homerooms in major league baseball and advertise on school buses. Many will argue that these trends produce greater public utility, as people willingly exchange goods and services at a price that is mutually advantageous to both parties.

In short, if people didn’t benefit from selling their souls, they wouldn’t do it. But these narrow metrics place profit above purpose.

Colleges are not immune to this way of thinking. Our values are evident in the way we pitch our campuses to prospective students. Typical admissions tour guides “sell” their universities to prospective students like another consumer good—emphasizing facilities, food, services, and local attractions. Given this consumerist mentality, it is not
the worth of their college education differently? Do they begin to value other important life goals? Does purpose begin to elbow out profit?

While we cannot answer these questions for all college graduates, we do have access to a unique data set of graduates from arts schools and training programs. The Strategic National Arts Alumni Project (SNAAP) is an annual online survey and data management system designed to improve arts-school education. To our knowledge, SNAAP is the most extensive concentrated effort ever to track the training, careers, and lives of arts graduates in the United States. Since 2008, SNAAP has collected information from over 100,000 arts alumni from hundreds of different educational institutions.

The responses of these alumni to the SNAAP survey not only call into question how we evaluate the worth of an arts education or the merits of a college degree in general—they also challenge the metrics we use to privilege profit over passion and materialism over meaning in multiple spheres of social life.

Art ≠ Money (and Arts Students Know This)

Students do not typically enroll in arts school with dollar signs in their eyes. While this point may be obvious to anyone who has majored in an arts field or known anyone who has, this seemingly simple assertion cuts at the heart of longstanding assumptions about schooling and success.

In fact, we find striking evidence that, despite their relatively low median earnings, these graduates are satisfied with their artistic training and their current work. Money is not what makes artists happy.

Among SNAAP respondents:

- 76 percent would go back and attend their degree-granting institutions again.
- 90 percent say their overall experience in arts school was either “good” or “excellent.”
- 87 percent are satisfied with their current jobs.
- 82 percent are satisfied with their ability to be creative in their current primary jobs.

Even among those who are currently unemployed and actively looking for work, 68 percent would attend the same institution again, and 84 percent rate their overall experience in arts school as “good” or “excellent.”

There is little relationship between the amount of money these graduates currently earn and their satisfaction with their work. For example, arts alumni who currently work primarily as dancers or choreographers earn the least of any artists. Yet they are the ones who are the most likely to indicate that they are satisfied with their work: 97 percent indicate that they are “very” or “somewhat” satisfied overall with their jobs.

Are Artists Weird?

One might argue that artists are the exceptions who prove the rule when it comes to notions about educational worth. Perhaps artists are particularly good at embracing their passions in the face of impending poverty. After all, numerous studies have shown that arts students tend to be less economically oriented than their peers.

But it’s not just artists who value things like job satisfaction, the ability to follow their passions, and the chance to be creative in their careers. There is little evidence, in general, that wealth is what makes human beings happy. In a 2012 New York Times article, Elizabeth Dunn and Michael Norton point out that people who earn $25,000 a year think their happiness will double if they earn $55,000, but it only increases 9 percent. And after $75,000, more money does not make you happier.

If this is the case, why is financial success the dominant frame we use to designate merit, not just for arts graduates or graduates in general but within numerous arenas of social life?

Yes, Money Is Important!

Income and employment are two crucial measures of the worth of a college degree. We do not have visions of some utopian society in which artists are able to eat paint and breathe passion. Money is important!

And while our SNAAP results reveal that the overall picture of arts’ graduates employment is not all doom and gloom—for instance, their unemployment rate is lower than that of the overall population—we join multiple other researchers in finding that arts graduates do not earn as much as their peers with equivalent degrees.

Many professional artists are underfunded, underpaid, underemployed, and exploited. These difficulties are exacerbated for different subgroups of graduates such as racial and ethnic minorities, women, those who live in certain geographic locations, and those without personal contacts within the arts. As we argue in a recent report (Lindemann & Tepper, 2012), there is an onus on arts schools to better prepare their students for navigating both the opportunities and challenges of the creative economy.

But we have a vision of a cultural context that does not privilege earnings for earnings’ sake. It is important to take into account whether our nation’s graduates are happy, are
finding meaning in life, and are resilient and creatively productive—particularly in today’s economy, which increasingly values creative solutions and requires graduates to be flexible and prepared to deal with ambiguity.

Arts alumni may or may not be “successful” based on the measures traditionally used to define achievement and contribution. However, they express high levels of overall satisfaction with their education and with their jobs, and they have higher-than-average rates of volunteering, civic participation, teaching, and charitable contributions. In short, they find work and happiness, and they give back to their communities.

So what is a college degree worth? If SNAAP tells us anything, it is that some of our nation’s lowest-earning college graduates are not miserable and may, in fact, be uniquely well prepared for today’s economic realities.

Resources