

SUNDAY REVIEW

The New York Times

# Aristotle's Wrongful Death



**By Frank Bruni**  
Opinion Columnist

May 26, 2018

History is on the ebb. Philosophy is on the ropes. And comparative literature? Please. It's an intellectual heirloom: cherished by those who can afford such baubles but disposable in the eyes of others.

I'm talking about college majors, and talk about college majors is loud and contentious these days. There's concern about whether schools are offering the right ones. There are questions about whether colleges should be emphasizing them at all. How does a deep dive into the classics abet a successful leap into the contemporary job market? Should an ambitious examination of English literature come at the cost of acquiring fluency in coding, digital marketing and the like?

Last Sunday The Chronicle of Higher Education published a special report that delved into this debate. One of the stories described what was happening at the flagship campus of the University of Illinois and at Assumption College in Worcester, Mass., casting these developments as different harbingers for higher education.

Illinois is pairing certain majors in the liberal arts — for example, anthropology and linguistics — with computer science. Assumption is doing away with a host of traditional majors in favor of new ones geared to practical skills. Goodbye, art history, geography and, yes, classics. Hello, data analytics, actuarial science and concentrations in physical and occupational therapy.

Assumption is hardly an outlier. Last year the University of Wisconsin at Superior announced that it was suspending nine majors, including sociology and political science, and warned that there might be additional cuts. The University of Wisconsin at Stevens Point recently proposed dropping 13 majors, including philosophy and English, to make room for programs with “clear career pathways.”

While these schools are swapping out certain majors for others, some higher education leaders are asking whether such devotion to a single field of study — and whether a college experience structured around that — are the right way to go.

“The future of work calls for something more radical: the elimination of academic majors as we have come to know them,” Jeffrey Selingo, the founding director of the Academy for Innovative Higher Education Leadership, wrote in a column that was part of The Chronicle’s special report. He advocated a college education that spans “all academic disciplines.”

Selingo is the author of several books about the rightful role and uses of college, the most recent of which, “There Is Life After College,” illustrates how thoughtful he can be on these matters.

But I worry that he’s suggesting an either/or where there needn’t be one. I worry that the current conversation about majors is part of a larger movement to tug college too far in a vocational direction.

And I worry that there’s a false promise being made. The world now changes at warp speed. Colleges move glacially. By the time they’ve assembled a new cluster of practical concentrations, an even newer cluster may be called for, and a set of job-specific skills picked up today may be obsolete less than a decade down the road. The idea of college as instantaneously responsive to employers’ evolving needs is a bit of a fantasy.

Eric Johnson, an education policy analyst in Chapel Hill, N.C., agrees that majors may well be “a poor way of organizing career preparation.”

“But that’s because *college* is a poor way of organizing career preparation,” he told me. “Deep, discipline-focused learning is simply a different goal than being adequately skilled to serve mercurial employers.”

Johnson wasn’t saying that colleges should be oblivious to job readiness and career placement. Nor am I. That notion, too, belongs to some fantasyland in which college doesn’t demand the time and money that it does and in which good incomes are easily secured.

But colleges needn’t abandon majors in general or supposedly arcane majors in particular in order to propel graduates into the work force. They could do better at encouraging and arranging something that they already promote and that savvy students already embrace, which is the considered, concerted use of research projects, extracurricular activities, part-time employment, internships and networking to set up first jobs.

Colleges needn’t abandon majors in order to give students breadth and nimbleness. That’s what general-education requirements are for. So why don’t more colleges expand or toughen those? That would additionally help to create shared experiences and common points of reference in a dangerously fractured society.

Interdisciplinary majors already exist, though colleges could be better at making that clear to students who’d benefit from them. And students with humanities majors are already choosing, as minors, computer science and the like.

Part of the skepticism toward traditional majors reflects a correct feeling that at some schools, some fields of study and course offerings are preserved largely because the faculty have a selfish investment in the status quo. If seats in the classroom are perpetually empty and money is sorely needed elsewhere, colleges shouldn’t ignore that.

But it’s a balancing act, because colleges shouldn’t lose sight of what makes traditional majors — even the arcane ones — so meaningful, especially now. And they shouldn’t downgrade the nonvocational mission of higher education: to cultivate minds, prepare

young adults for enlightened citizenship, give them a better sense of their perch in history and connect them to traditions that transcend the moment. History, philosophy and comparative literature are bound to be better at that than occupational therapy. They're sturdier threads of cultural and intellectual continuity.

And majoring in them — majoring in *anything* — is a useful retort to the infinite distractions, short attention spans and staccato communications of the smartphone era. Perhaps now, more than ever, young people need to be shown the rewards of sustained attention and taught how to hold a thought. That's what a major does. There's a reason that it's often called a *discipline*.

"Becoming versed in the intricacies of a complex thing is itself a worthwhile skill," Johnson said. I agree. It also underscores what real knowledge and true perspective are. In a country that's awash in faux expertise and enamored of pretenders, that's no small thing.

Students interested in using their education for expressly vocational purposes should have an array of attractive options in addition to college, which isn't right for everyone and is hardly the lone path to professional fulfillment. Some of those options should be collaborations with employers grooming the work force they need.

But students who want to commune with Kant and Keats shouldn't be made to feel that they're indulgent dilettantes throwing away all hope of a lucrative livelihood. They're making a commitment to a major that has endured because its fruits are enduring.

I invite you to follow me on [Twitter \(@FrankBruni\)](#) and join me on [Facebook](#).

*Follow The New York Times Opinion section on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter \(@NYTopinion\)](#), and sign up for the [Opinion Today newsletter](#).*

A version of this article appears in print on May 26, 2018, on Page SR3 of the New York edition with the headline: Aristotle's Wrongful Death