

# Why College: Helping Students Imagine More Than a Job

by April Heaney, LeaRN Director, David Cozzens, Dean of Students, and  
Jo Chytka, Director of Center for Advising & Career Services

During June Orientation 2009, LeaRN surveyed 1,076 incoming UW students about their expectations for college. In response to the open-ended question, "Why are you pursuing a college degree?" 72% named job or financial reasons—and most listed only these as motivations for attending college.

There's no question that career interests have long been a major factor in the motivation to attend college. But, to what extent has the economic downturn (as well as cultural shifts toward professional or "product" outcomes for college) served to shrink development of intrinsic goals?

In the September 2009 issue of *Harper's Magazine*, Mark Slouka bemoans the effects of an increasing emphasis on "workplace outcomes" in higher education, arguing instead that "our primary function is to teach people, not tasks; to participate in the complex and infinitely worthwhile labor of forming citizens...capable of furthering what's best about us and forestalling what's worst. It's only secondarily—one might say incidentally—about producing workers" (34). In spite of the eloquence of Slouka's argument, the effects of a lagging economy make it more challenging than ever to help students recognize the deeper goals of a college education.

Reports of shrinking job availability raise anxieties for parents and students, many of whom have already been impacted by job loss or salary reduction. Recent trends in college admission suggest that students are increasingly choosing colleges based on price rather than personal fit. In fact, students are applying to more colleges in hopes of finding the best financial aid package—at times pitting schools against each other to garner higher aid (Chronicle Research Services, 2008). In addition, according to a 2006 study by the National Bureau of Economic Research, students who graduate during a recession suffer a 9% reduction in annual earnings initially and tend to start at smaller and lower paying firms—meaning that they must change jobs more frequently (Block).

It's no wonder, then, that students are less inclined to enter college thinking about the intrinsic rewards of "process" rather than "product." But, an overemphasis on external "locus" reasons for college can lead to disappointment and frustration in the future. The old notion that a liberal arts education offers the best foundation on which to build a thoughtful life, which might also provide an interesting and/or good paying job/career seems to be passé in the post-modern world. However, so much of human satisfaction comes from enjoying the journey—not to mention developing *transferrable* habits of thought that reach into every facet of life from job to responsible citizenship. It is important that we assist our students to understand the importance of learning as both "end" and "means to an end."

## **Broadening Thinking About College Goals**

While simply being aware of the cultural and practical pressures on students to focus on career can help instructors to understand students' mindsets, the following suggestions offer a few ideas for expanding students' ideas about college goals:

- Invite a panel of diverse faculty and staff at UW to discuss their college path and the experiences that shaped them—in and out of the classroom.
- Share recent and historical debates or discussions on the value of higher education.
- Ask students to evaluate the University Studies Program at UW, comparing it to other institutions.
- Encourage students to stretch their thinking about what college might mean for them personally—foster discussion and brainstorming about the "layers" of a college education.

## Supporting Career Planning and Anxiety

The Center for Advising and Career Services (CACS) at UW assists students with a broad range of academic and career advising including degree selection, career planning, and job search needs. Jo Chytka, CACS director, points out that students need support on both ends of the spectrum—fully realizing goals for higher education and also receiving guidance with career connections during their college years. The CACS center highlights the following campus-wide goals in meeting the spectrum of student anxieties and needs:

- Help students develop a viable plan for choosing their major and related career that is compatible with their abilities, interests and values. According to research, student commitment to educational and career goals is perhaps the strongest factor associated with persistence to degree completion. Given students' desire for financial and career success, the difficulty of finding and/or committing to long-term goals increases the risk for student attrition. (Cueso)
- Recognize the pressures that students face in choosing a major and completing a degree in four years. Over 50% of students change their major at least once. Parental pressure and the stipulation that Wyoming students only have eight semesters of Hathaway scholarship have implications on choice of major, compressing the ability to use the freshman year to "explore" academic interests.
- Assist students in recognizing the long term benefit of the prescribed major courses and select electives that will compliment their interests. The goal becomes to engage the student in the first and second years to identify, develop and visualize their academic and career interests and goals.
- Communicate the skills that employers value – communication, critical thinking/problem solving, open mindedness and adaptability and illustrate how course and major learning outcomes parallel these.
- Expose students to real world experiences through internships, class speakers, mentors and volunteer experiences can help them understand how their in-class work supports their vocational goals.

**Center for Advising & Career Services:** [www.uwyo.edu/CACS](http://www.uwyo.edu/CACS)

*"provides academic support and advising for University of Wyoming students and assists students and alumni with their career planning and job search needs"*

**Dean of Students:** [www.uwyo.edu/DOS](http://www.uwyo.edu/DOS)

*"promotes student services, advocacy, leadership, involvement, civic engagement, civility, publications, and diversity by creating positive experiences for UW students"*

**The University Studies Program:** [www.uwyo.edu/unst](http://www.uwyo.edu/unst)

*"ensures that each student's program includes the elements essential to a lifetime of personal and professional growth: habits of mind, practices of active citizenship, and development of intellectual skills"*

## Resources

Block, Sandra. "In a Recession, is College Worth It? Fear of Debt Changes Plans." *USA Today*. 30 Aug. 2009.

Chronicle Research Services (*The Chronicle of Higher Education*). "Financial Uncertainty and the Admissions Class of 2008." Dec. 2008.

<http://www.nasfaa.org/publications/2008/runcertainty121508.html>

Cuseo, Joe. "Decided, Undecided, and In Transition: Implications for Academic Advisement, Career Counseling, & Student Retention." <http://www.uwc.edu/administration/academic-affairs/esfy/cuseo/>

Slouka, Mark. "Dehumanized: When Math and Science Rule the School." *Harper's Magazine*. Sept. 2009.