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In Defense of Equal Tuition for All Majors

By John Villasenor

Should English and history majors be forced to pay higher tuition than engineering students do? Yes, according to a recently released draft report from a Florida task force on [higher education](#). The report recommends a tuition structure that would favor students majoring in "strategic" areas, including security and emergency services, globalization, and science, technology, engineering, and math (the so-called STEM fields). It is a well-meaning proposal intended to meet genuine needs, but it's likely to create more problems than it solves.

Offering tuition breaks for strategic majors is meant to entice undergraduates who otherwise might have pursued their passion for, say, literature, to instead choose to spend their college years learning skills like [Java](#) programming. But will it work? Almost certainly not. If the substantial financial advantages of graduating with a degree in a strategic discipline aren't already attracting sufficient numbers of students, throwing an annual tuition discount at them won't have much effect.

According to data released in September by the National Association of Colleges and Employers, bachelor's-degree recipients in the Class of 2012 who majored in engineering and [computer science](#) received average starting salaries of over \$60,000, while degree recipients in the humanities and social sciences had average starting salaries of less than \$37,000. That is an enormous difference. Students who select a major on the basis of degree marketability alone shouldn't be second-guessed by the rest of us.

But neither should students whose interests happen to lie elsewhere. Undergraduates who elect a course of study that might mean forgoing tens of thousands of dollars in annual income upon graduation are unlikely to change their majors to obtain a tuition discount measuring only a small fraction of that amount. For them, Florida's not-so-gentle attempt to influence their choices would more likely be viewed as an insult than an enticement.

There are other negative consequences as well. For example, what of the students who enter college thinking they want to study a

STEM discipline, but then discover after a year or two that they simply don't enjoy it? Does Florida really want to add to their already substantial stress by imposing a financial penalty on them—and, in many cases, on their tuition-paying parents—for switching majors?

Do Florida's public universities really want to formalize the second-class treatment of liberal-arts majors in that way? The resulting negative feedback would drive them to other universities, leaving those who remain to bear an even higher burden of what is in effect a tuition subsidy paid to support students studying in the favored disciplines. Recruitment and retention of top liberal-arts faculty, too, would suffer.

But those people who fault the task force's differentiated-tuition recommendation simply because it reflects what they view as an overly business-oriented approach to higher education don't have it quite right, either. In many respects, colleges are businesses, or at least businesslike, in their activities. They exist in large measure to deliver what can be described as a product (education) to their customers (students). They bring in money through tuition, donations, government and industry grants, and—in the case of public universities—the support of state taxpayers. They spend money on faculty and administrative salaries, student aid, and infrastructure. When the inflow and outflow don't balance, a college's health and eventually its very survival are threatened.

An argument that colleges should never vary tuition levels across fields in accordance with what some might call business considerations is undermined by the general lack of policy-based objections to the dozens of colleges that do exactly that. For example, at the University of California at Los Angeles, where I teach, in-state graduate students in most liberal-arts disciplines pay annual tuition of just over \$11,000. A California resident who is a student at UCLA's law school, however, also pays an additional "professional-degree supplemental tuition" of nearly \$32,000 per year. First-year M.B.A. students at Stanford currently pay more than \$57,000 in annual tuition, while tuition for graduate students in liberal-arts fields there is about \$41,000. Thus, at the graduate level, the existence of widely varying tuition levels across fields is routine and not considered particularly objectionable.

So what is it about the Florida proposal that has struck a nerve with so many people? For starters, in contrast with what occurs in many other countries, in the United States we regard the undergraduate years as a time when many students are still in the process of deciding on a career. Erecting tuition-based barriers would undermine some of the breadth and flexibility that has traditionally

defined the American undergraduate experience, and which arguably helps develop the agility of thought that is such a vital ingredient of American innovation.

More fundamentally, if we want to bring more college students into STEM fields and other "strategic" disciplines, we shouldn't have to purchase their interest through tuition discounts. Rather, we need to do a better job of conveying to young people why careers in STEM and related fields can be rewarding in ways that go well beyond first-year salary numbers. That is a process that should occur largely at the elementary- and secondary-school levels, and one at which America could do far better.

As the Florida task force recognized, Florida's—and, more generally, America's—economic prosperity will depend in large part on a strong public higher-education system that can supply college graduates trained in high-growth, high-demand fields. It is eminently reasonable to consider ways in which public funds can be more effectively allocated to help achieve that goal. But turning liberal-arts undergraduates into second-class citizens isn't one of them.

Correction (1/7/2013, 4:48 p.m.): This article referred incorrectly to the professional-degree supplemental tuition paid by state residents enrolled in the University of California at Los Angeles's law school. The amount is almost \$32,000 annually, not almost \$48,000. The article has been updated to reflect this correction.

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David Youngberg 4 weeks ago

The key change of Florida's proposal is not getting students from the liberal arts to the STEMs—though it's not hard to imagine this change could tip the scale for some students—but to bring those who want to do a STEM but can't afford the tuition regardless of major. We tend to complain about the students who go to college but don't belong there. It's easy to forget there are many others who should go but we never get to see.

There are also large spillover benefits to the STEMs that other disciplines lack (including my own of economics); the gains to society are far greater than the increase in pay and employability of the major. Spending taxpayer dollars to encourage such positive externalities is an excellent idea.