

College Isn't the Time for a "Broad Education"

I always roll my eyes when I hear liberal arts professors today defending general requirements and expounding on the glories of a broad education.

It's not that I disagree with them about the value of a broad education (after all, my doctorate is in one of the liberal arts). It's just that I think college is not the time for it. College is the time to specialize.

[According to Dorothy Sayers](#) – one of the most famous promoters of the liberal arts in the 20th century – much of modern education involves “an artificial prolongation of intellectual childhood and adolescence.” It used to be that a well-educated person was deemed fit for higher education at the age of 16 or so, and specialization (either in the form of work or further education) by the age of 18.

Indeed, that's the way it was in the West until the modern era. In [Ancient Greece and Rome](#), students were supposed to have completed their broad education by the end of their teenage years. The minority of students who continued their education would then begin studies in a particular subject – rhetoric and philosophy being the two most popular – at the age of 17 or 18.

In the Middle Ages, the average age of the first year student at [Oxford](#) was fifteen. The same starting age marked Ivy League schools in the 17th and 18th centuries, where students would undertake a rigorous course of study in classical languages, literature, history, philosophy, and theology.

But as a result of the dumbing down of K-12 education, what we have in most colleges today is a schizophrenic situation. College students are expected to move toward specialization by

selecting a major, yet are usually not given a satisfactory number of classes in it (thus creating a felt need for Masters degrees). At the same time, they are expected to spend time and money taking general requirement courses under the guise that they will make their education more "well-rounded." In truth, though, these courses offer only a flimsy presentation of a particular subject, are often disconnected from one another, and treat of material and skills that should have been sufficiently covered in the high school years.

I'm all for a broad education, but that should be taken care of in the high school years and complemented then with more depth. When boys and girls become adults, let them specialize.