Will You Be Ready for a Job that Doesn’t Yet Exist?

I have been thinking recently about the following question: How do we prepare students for jobs that not only don’t yet exist, but also cannot yet be imagined?

This question came to my attention when I followed the link to a recent blog post by a physics professor at Southeastern Louisiana University. The post explores the question of what universities would look like if their primary purpose were to train and develop the workforce, but he goes on to argue against that idea for several reasons including “A job training strategy only works for jobs that you know about. How do you train for jobs that don’t yet exist?” and “This workforce development plan is short sighted. It might actually produce more ‘workers’ in the next 10 years, but it could have terrible effects for the long term future.”

Reading this resonated with me because I had recently attended a meeting where someone pointed out that we currently hire staff at CWRU for positions that we could not have imagined 8 to 10 years ago. As I think back over my own lifetime, it would have been hard to imagine at the time I went off to college some of the jobs that exist now and the various kinds of expertise one needs to develop to be successful in these positions. I certainly never imagined social media, smart walls in art museums, or genetic medicine.

Many of you are preparing yourselves for careers that I could not have imagined. But as you look ahead to work lives that may last on the order of 50 years after graduation, will you be ready to step into positions that none of us can imagine today?

Focusing on entrepreneurship is one step in this direction. Through a variety of activities on campus, such as think[box] and Blackstone LaunchPad, you are innovating to create your own products, business models, and companies. It is great that Case Western Reserve is a university that actively supports such activities and supports students as they seek to create their own future employment, but that is about the immediate future and opportunities that you can imagine. It doesn’t really get at the initial question about the more distant future that we cannot yet fully comprehend. [By the way, I have become an interested observer of entrepreneurship. Friends and family have observed that Kickstarter has become my favorite web site!]

If we can’t predict those future jobs, we surely cannot lay out a specific curriculum to prepare for them. So what advice can I provide to help you begin to prepare for the jobs of the future? Perhaps the best answer comes from looking backward to see what kinds of preparation have contributed to your predecessors’ ability to adapt to a changing world. I would argue that it is the breadth of experience and learning that you can achieve here that will serve you well in the future. I cannot promise you that all of the specific knowledge you learn in your courses will stand the test of time. Some of it will turn out to be wrong, or new classifications will prove to be more helpful to organize knowledge (apparently Pluto is not a planet like other planets). But what will prove to be invaluable and lasting is your gaining the confidence to learn new things in a wide range of fields as those fields emerge as central to the future. This will come from taking courses in which you learn to pose questions in very different disciplines, to organize your thoughts about those topics in meaningful ways, to make connections across fields (those connections may lead to the next innovation for which you can be the entrepreneur), and to research new ideas. I guess my background as an economist is coming out as I
suggest that you diversify your portfolio between focused study to prepare for a first career and broader study to prepare for an unknown future career.

Let me end by saying that I am surprising myself by having written two consecutive Newsletter essays that emphasize the connection between your academic work and jobs, when I think there is so much more to the goals of a college education than career preparation. That will be a tale for another month .

Now, let me really end by wishing you a good spring break, perhaps in a place where it actually feels like spring. There will be much to do when you return, so rest up while you can.

Let me know what you think. You can write to me at jeffrey.wolcowitz@case.edu.

A full archive of my past Upperclass Newsletter essays is available on the Undergraduate Studies web site.