Rhetorical Situation

Proposition: University educators should provide greater opportunities for students to pursue passion projects for self-learning.

Audience: Most likely university staff, including professors, educators, academic advisors, etc. They are most likely interested in helping students learn better, reforming the education system. University students interested in pursuing "better" forms of education for themselves, such as projects or gap year internships may also read.

Genre: An online 600 word editorial in a popular education-based publication targeted towards university staff and students thinking about education reform.

Motive of Author: As someone who wishes to go into engineering and entrepreneurship, both of which are widely regarded as very hands on and cannot be taught in a traditional school-based environment, I wish that Penn and other schools offered their students a greater degree of independent studies and projects that could still fulfill their academic credit limits. As a student myself, I recognize that most students see assignments and the current education system as "broken" and thus aim to game the system and view assignments as grade-focused only instead of learning opportunities. My motive is thus to convince students to pursue independent studies if possible, and for university faculty and administrators to consider a greater degree of supporting independent studies from students. My other motive is to write a compelling editorial that could get me published and all the benefits that come from that.

Motive of Reader: The reader is frustrated with the current educational system, whether they are staff or students, and want to seek ways to either help their students learn better or want to find other opportunities to learn (especially in a hands-on real-world environment). Such readers will be intrigued in my personal experiences with starting a passion project, and from an engineering/entrepreneurship POV, I believe I offer some unique perspectives on this idea.

Author's Goal: To convince the reader that they should pursue passion projects or co-ops or gap year internships (students) or that expanding an independent study program or starting a co-op program is highly beneficial for students (educators), and that the current classroom based learning style is outdated.

Author's Plan: To show the reader several anecdotal examples of learning a lot from passion projects, stats on what industries say about college students (they are ill-prepared) and stats about hiring rates after graduating college, references to other universities co-op or independent study programs.

Rhetorical Strategies: Anecdotes + stats. Emotional + rational appeal!

Logical Outline

(Given) A university/college role is to help students learn.

(Given) Educators want to help their students learn the best they can.

(Given) Traditional education has a focus on grading, assignments, and rigid course structure that does not allow for the student to be flexible and take interesting courses.

(Given) A student within a university wants to graduate in 4 years and thus make the most of their time at university to learn and prepare for their future.

(Given) A major role of university is to prepare students for a future career.

(Thus) University staff, educators, and administrators should allow students to pursue project based, independent studies as a core of their course curriculum.

(Because) The college education's rigid course selections may not be in a student's interest.

(For example) Many students complain about General Requirements that are not related to what they want to pursue.

(For example) The rise of GPT and AI in education proves that assignments are viewed as mundane and unimportant to a student's learning.

(Because) Traditional courses do not reflect the experiences in a real-world career environment.

(For example) Astronomy and education majors are not reflective of what a student's real-world career environment would be like.

(For example) Learning "entrepreneurship" by studying previous case-studies does not teach students to actually launch and run a business and the processes involved in it.

(Because) Students interested in their passion projects will rapidly learn more and provide a better learning experience reflective of a real-world career.

(For example) Personal anecdote of entrepreneurship being my full-time passion rather than just a class for me to take.

(Some may argue that) integrating project-based learning and independent studies into the existing curriculum poses significant logistical complexities, such as the need for specialized faculty expertise. However, universities don't need to be the one teaching and guiding students. Instead, schools could form strategic partnerships with industry and establish co-op programs, which would be beneficial for both the industry (they get more interns and exposure to students who want to work there in the future) and the students (who get to work on real-world projects that actually interest them)..

Rethinking Higher Education: Why Independent Student Projects Matter More Than Ever

Maxx Yung
I am a freshman at the University of Pennsylvania.

Apr 09, 2024, 08:25pm EDT

Is a traditional college education really helping students, or is it simply dragging students down in this day and age?

As my first year at the University of Pennsylvania comes to a close, I find myself drawn towards what Mark Twain once said: "I'll never let my schooling get in the way of my education."

In agreement, I have found that the traditionally-oriented university curriculum that exists at Penn to be ineffective for my education. Penn, and most other universities, promote a traditional curriculum that can be summed up as:

1. Rigid and inflexible for students to pursue the courses they are interested in.
2. Promotes students to achieve high grades over achieving understanding.
3. Often lecture or in-classroom based instead of real-world or project based.

If the main goal of college is to prepare students for a future in their career, I daresay that the traditional college education is failing us. Instead, it is the students, who themselves scour for internships at nights, who themselves learn applicable skills over the weekends, who themselves fit in independent research time in-between the dense walls of blocked time for classes, to be the prime factor in their success. Rather than hindering this, **university administrators need to provide greater opportunities for students to pursue independent real-world projects for self-learning.**

Many university administrators are opposed to this – citing massive changes to the traditional curriculum – but if you *really care* about students' education and their future career prospects, your resistance should turn into acceptance as evidence suggests that independent real-world learning experiences are significantly better for students and their future.

One evidence is that traditional rigid course structures often fail to align with students' career aspirations, forcing them to slog through irrelevant course requirements. One astronomy student I spoke to was drawn in by the prospect of studying black holes, but was stuck to slog through "core" courses such as chemistry or cell biology. Another student in the education major was disappointed to learn that becoming a teacher meant sitting through law and policy courses.

Furthermore, the traditionally common "class lecture followed by dozens of psets" learning approach has been criticized for its inability to prepare students for real-world career experiences. Higher-level economics students often complain that their "psets" are too abstract or mathematically intensive, while lacking clear applications to real-world economic issues or the practical aspects of economic policy. Additionally, with the rise of AI, up to 56% of students use AI on their assignments, particularly in classes deemed irrelevant to their career goals. For example, computer science majors may use AI to complete their chemistry assignments without actually learning the material.

It is likely that more students will rely on AI tools to breeze through their disliked general education requirements, focusing solely on maintaining that perfect 4.0 rather than acquiring true knowledge. You, university administrators and professors, must now more than ever encourage and allow students to pursue career-related independent projects they are interested in, thereby intrinsically motivating the students to learn for the sake of learning, rather than for a grade. Adopting this learning paradigm would allow students to actually mirror a real-world experience of their future career. As a student pursuing entrepreneurship by running my own startup, I find that I am learning far beyond what Penn's Entrepreneurship courses could possibly offer.

Furthermore, allowing students the opportunity to explore topics they are passionate about, they are more likely to take personal initiative and can oftentimes lead to a deeper learning experience. In my case, entrepreneurship became not pages of case studies to memorize, or

memorizing formulas to calculate churn rates. Rather, it became something I now work on full-time – learning far more than I would've if I stuck with the traditional way of teaching entrepreneurship in university education.

Now, besides being hesitant to imposing significant changes to your universities' curriculum, you may also question the logistical complexities involved in weaving project-based learning and independent studies into the traditional educational fabric — pointing out the challenges like the need for faculty with niche expertise, the need for additional funding among universities, and the already busy schedules of professors who cannot facilitate individual assistance with projects.

And I agree these challenges exist at the university level.

But it doesn't have to be universities to implement this. Instead, universities could offer co-op programs to students, where they receive class credit by doing semester internships in companies they *actually* want to work in for the future. These companies often have the funding and experts necessary to accommodate student interns. Moreover, these companies are incentivized to attract students to their co-op programs to foster brand awareness, loyalty, and talent – and will actively attempt to recruit students from established co-op programs.

Universities such as Drexel and Northeastern have already been doing this. This approach not only enriches a student's education, but also significantly enhances employability upon graduation as co-op students regularly accept return offers. Northeastern reports that over 50% of their graduating students receive full-time job offers from their co-op employers, while Drexel reports a 47% full-time offer rate from their co-op employers. Moreover, these co-op programs are highly acclaimed by students themselves, who often view these co-ops as a highlight of their college experience. The same cannot be said for traditional courses at virtually any other institution. According to one student, "the co-ops have been wonderful… Drexel has a very well structured program and will walk you through it."

It's a compelling model that enables students to broaden their educational experience while enjoying the merits of independent, real-world learning. And it's about time for you to adopt a progressively-oriented university curriculum.
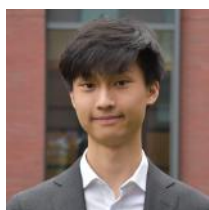
Maxx Yung
I am a freshman studying Materials Engineering and Entrepreneurship at the University of Pennsylvania. After six years of research at Stanford Med and Penn Med, I am now leading Nanoneuro Systems, where I am building the future of sustainable AI and paving the way for AGI and biocomputing, currently raising over $1.5M in non-equity grants.