General education courses open new horizons

During this Thanksgiving weekend, I can imagine several dinner table conversations about college plans. I would not be surprised by pressures on next year's college freshmen to declare an undergraduate major before indulging in the pumpkin pie.

Please consider this advice from a college president committed to student success. It is imperative for students to use the freshman year to excel in required general education courses. These liberal arts courses provide the foundation for college majors — and for life. They also offer opportunities for exploring careers — some that students never even knew existed.

These courses transfer, without any loss of credit, to just about any major at any university.

Liberal arts courses are designed to help students learn what every employer wants: excellent communication, critical thinking and problem-solving.

Most important, liberal learning helps students to transfer knowledge from the classroom to the world of work.

General education courses are not meant to be checked off a list until the real courses begin. On the contrary, these can open up unimaginable opportunities.

After a year of intellectual exploration, sophomores are in a position to select a major. With very few exceptions — engineering and nursing come to mind — a student can and should wait until sophomore year before selecting a major.

Now I'd like to shatter the biggest myth of all. To be economically prudent, students do not have to select a major that sounds like a job. Sure, if you love accounting, by all means major in the field and become an accountant. But if you don’t even like the subject matter, major in something that excites you intellectually.

Majoring in English, philosophy, or history does not narrow a student's choices to teaching or serving coffee at Starbucks. By the way, philosophy majors have the best scores on the LSAT's (necessary for law school admission). Liberal arts majors can transfer their experiences in communication and analysis to settings in the for-profit and not-for-profit worlds.

This intellectual transfer, however, does not happen on its own. Universities have an obligation to partner with employers to offer internships to liberal arts majors so they can practice their skills outside the classroom.

At Governors State University, our plans for our first freshman class, entering in August 2014, embody these principles. We will admit only 370 first-year students, who will be grouped together so every student takes at least three classes with the same classmates.

Students will follow a core curriculum made up of liberal arts courses approved under the Illinois Articulation Initiative. These courses will emphasize communication, critical and innovative thinking, civic engagement and ethics.

The English composition courses will have a writing-across-the-curriculum framework, providing explicit opportunities for students to explore communication requirements in a variety of majors. The university will offer on-campus work experience and internships.

So let's be thankful for the opportunities available at our nation's universities to pursue the broad-based education necessary for the rapid changes of the 21st century. Then pass the pumpkin pie.

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