What Is the Value of a Rochester Education?

The University begins a project to analyze its 'value proposition.'

By Scott Hauser

Chris Antola '98, '05S (MBA) would be the first to admit that he didn't really know what he was going to get from spending four years at Rochester. When he sent off the paperwork for admission from his home in Los Angeles, all he knew was that the University was well regarded academically, seemed to offer a lot of opportunity for students to get involved with campus life, and was small enough that he would be able to interact closely with his professors.

"I had no idea what I wanted to do when I went to the U of R," says Antola, who today is senior vice president of strategic programming at FX Networks, the entertainment cable TV networks owned by Fox. "I remember sitting around my family dining room here in LA, and on the application they asked what you wanted to major in, and I hadn't the faintest clue. I figured I would go to Rochester and experience as much as I could and try to hone in on what I wanted to do with my life."

Once on campus, he crammed in as much as he could: after taking classes with Tom DiPiero, then the chair of the modern languages department, Antola eventually decided on a French major and completed a journalism and psychology minor as well as a business certificate. Equally important for him, though, he was a production control manager and a DJ at WRUR, he wrote for the *Campus Times,* he studied abroad in France, he took classes at Eastman and Simon, and he was a Take Five scholar, completing a project with ethnomusicologist Ellen Koskoff at the Eastman School of Music. He returned in 2003 to get an MBA from the Simon Business School.

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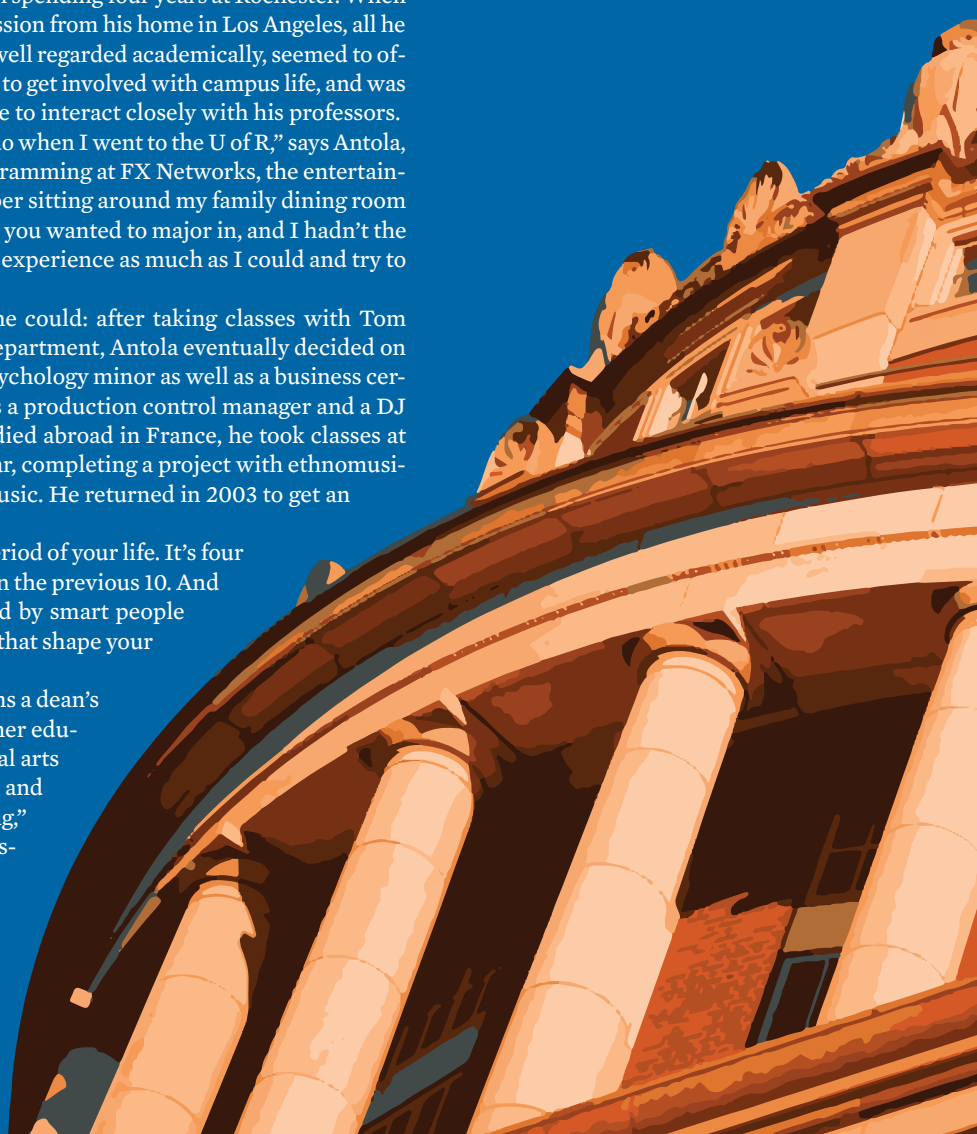
Antola's experience is the kind of story that warms a dean's heart. It's almost axiomatic among academics, higher education administrators, and many graduates of liberal arts programs that such an investment of time, effort, and money is well "worth it," "invaluable," "life-changing," enriching the career opportunities and the life satisfaction of individual students.



STEVE BOERNER (PHOTO ILLUSTRATION); KEN HUTH (ORIGINAL PHOTO)

Steeped in the traditional ethos of the liberal arts, Rochester's curriculum and programs are designed to offer students a broad-based academic grounding in critical reasoning, problem analysis, and the ability to communicate effectively, coupled with the personal and social skills that are sharpened from engaging intellectually and socially with a talented group of peers.

But the value of spending four years studying at a liberal arts–oriented institution has come under increasing scrutiny in the post–Great Recession era of the 21st century. In political circles, President Barack Obama has launched an effort to develop a federal system to rank the nation's higher education programs while the governors of North Carolina, Louisiana, Wisconsin, and other states have publicly questioned whether taxpayers should support higher education programs that can't demonstrate they result in jobs for graduates.

Elsewhere, there's been a steady rise in calls from technology-enthusiasts that higher education is ripe for "disruption," giving the impression that MOOCs (massive open online courses) and other online "delivery systems," for-profit institutions, and a narrow focus on credentialing represent the future of higher education.

Given all that, it's easy to feel as if a liberal education is under siege.

That's not entirely mistaken, says Debra Humphreys of the Association of American Colleges and Universities, a national consortium, which includes Rochester and that dedicates itself to "the quality, vitality, and public standing of undergraduate liberal education."

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"Since the economic downturn and since the contraction of available public monies to invest in public education—as states have faced serious budget shortfalls, higher education is an area where people have narrowed their vision and talked about [education] in terms only of workforce development," she says. "I think that trend is dangerous—both for our democracy and frankly for the very economic vitality that we need to bring the tax revenues back up again.

"What we've seen consistently in our own research and in the broader economic research is that we actually don't need narrow training. We need more liberally educated graduates with higher and higher levels of capacity. This society and this economy are demanding that. Misguided policy pronouncements about the need for training and a pulling back from a long-standing tradition of providing and expanding the opportunities for more and more students to get a broad liberal education—I think that that's very short-sighted."

So how can universities like Rochester articulate their "value proposition," as the entrepreneurs would say? Is a liberal education a financial investment that "pays off" over time? Is it worth going into debt for? Is it a time to discover intellectual passions regardless of a particular job goal? Is it a proving ground for developing the personal and social skills required in a diverse democratic society? All of the above? More of one than another?

While such questions play out on a national level, Provost Peter Lennie says understanding how Rochester has influenced—and continues to influence—the lives of its students, their families, and the social fabric of the country is increasingly important. A robust understanding of that influence can help faculty, students, alumni, and parents understand how Rochester graduates not only advance professionally but also how their interaction with Rochester has enriched their lives in other important ways. The information also could help academic leaders enhance the University's programs, strengthen admissions, advising, and career initiatives, and feed back into the College's cocurricular opportunities.

"These are extremely important issues as we look toward the future of the University," Lennie says. "Having a more robust sense of what our alumni value about their experience here, how we helped shape their lives, how they think we can do better, and how we can draw on their life experience will help us better demonstrate the value of a Rochester education."

Beginning this spring, Lennie is leading a project to survey alumni who earned undergraduate degrees from Arts, Sciences & Engineering about their experience at Rochester. Hoping to capture both quantitative and qualitative information, the goal is to build a more complete picture than earlier surveys have provided of Rochester, its alumni, and their lives after graduation. As the undergraduate effort is fine-tuned, the survey will be rolled out to other units of the University.

Since the University's founding, a hallmark of Rochester's educational experience has been a grounding in a broad spectrum of disciplines in the arts and sciences. In his 1854 inaugural address, the University's first president, Martin Brewer Anderson, spoke on the theme of "The Ends and Means of Liberal Education."

Writing in the early 1960s, historian Arthur May noted that while much of Anderson's address was couched in the temper of his times, his comments "reflected the wisdom of the ages in the sphere of education and enshrined plain horse-sense, which is stable-mindedness. He developed at some length a doctrine later known as 'Holism,' that is, the training of youths for rounded careers during a half century or so of mature life, as distinguished from narrowly confined vocationalism, or 'the mercantile point of view,' in Anderson's phrase. Decrying the prevalent American materialism, he pleaded, 'Let us shape our educational system to make men.'"

More than 160 years later, Anderson would be surprised to learn

College Graduates, Watch Your Email

A University project to survey alumni who hold undergraduate degrees from Arts, Sciences & Engineering is scheduled to begin in March.

A randomly selected sample of graduates will receive the survey by email, with directions to an online instrument, where recipients will be asked to answer several questions about their Rochester experience.

The survey will include prompts for traditional quantitative and demographic information as well as questions intended to elicit qualitative information about professional and career achievements, personal fulfillment, social engagement, and other topics.

A report based on the results is expected to be completed later this spring.

how the Rochester student body has changed. About evenly divided between men and women, undergraduates represent every state in the country. About 12 percent are under-represented minorities, and about 20 percent come from nearly 100 countries outside the United States.

But the idea of giving students a broadly conceived liberal education remains very much intact. Under the Rochester Curriculum, introduced in the early 1990s, areas of study are divided into three major categories—natural sciences (including mathematics and engineering), social sciences, and the humanities. Students choose a discipline to major in, based on their primary academic interest, and choose two sets of three related courses—known as clusters—in each of the other two areas.

Combine the curriculum with a strong residential focus—nearly all students live on campus for at least two years and many live in University housing for all of their four years at Rochester—and Rochester becomes a "life-changing" experience for students, says Richard Feldman, dean of the College and a professor of philosophy.

"What was true and remains true is this: if you assemble 5,000 or so bright, inquisitive undergraduates and get them into a community and get them to interact with one another, what they will learn from one another, what they will cause one another to learn, what they will inspire in others is a terrific experience. And it would be missed if we didn't have a residential college and if we didn't have the sense of community that we have. That's a great strength.

"When you add to it the diversity of the College, the range of interests, the backgrounds of the student body, and you think about the world that students will be graduating into—that's something special that we're able to provide. That makes it, for me, vital that we do everything that we can to promote those valuable interactions among students."

Feldman says he's confident that most alumni would say that they have been successful over the long arc of their lives, but he's particularly curious about those who have graduated over the past 10 to 25 years. He and other College leaders know that student interests (and those of their parents) have shifted in recent years, leaning toward science and engineering and away from the humanities, but he says having an up-to-date picture will guide strategic decisions about how to improve both academic and nonacademic programs.

"I'm not looking to discourage students from choosing a major in any particular discipline," Feldman says. "I'm looking to arm our departments with information about what students who study in their fields can do after graduation."

Knowing more about how the career paths of alumni—whether they pursued other educational opportunities to achieve their goals, for example—could be helpful in enhancing majors and in helping guide current students to develop a combination of interests, skills, and abilities that will serve them better, Feldman says.

Al Robinson '04 can vouch for that kind of combination. Now an investment manager for a private insurance company in London, Robinson was a double major in religion and computer science.

While he says that having a computer science degree is "sort of a lifelong ticket to a job," his major in religion was the "life-changing" experience for him.

One of his first classes as a freshman was Emil Homerin's course, History of Islam. "This was before 9/11," he says. "I knew nothing about Islam, and I thought, I'm in college now and this is exactly what you're supposed to be doing: learning about stuff that you would never in a million years hear about in high school."

The course—not to mention Homerin and his colleagues in the Department of Religion and Classics—was so compelling that he took several other classes in the department and declared a major.

As a religion major, he was introduced to a like-minded corps of fellow student scholars, almost all of whom had a second major in another field, and all of whom were excited about intellectual discovery.

"For me, that became a core part of my experience at the University—getting that much social exposure to people who were doing all sorts of different things but who were also very interested in a common topic," Robinson says. "That was really cool. It's just such an unexpected thing. The problem is that I can see that it's not something you can easily market to people."

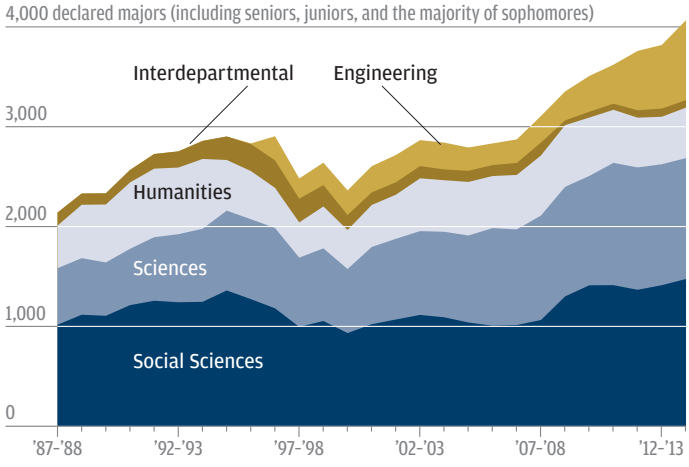
Sara Nainzadeh '99, a portfolio manager for a New York City

Course of College

"A liberal education is a tradition that changes over time," says Debra Humphreys of the Association of American Colleges and Universities, but one that retains the idea of grounding students in a broad spectrum of academic, personal, and social endeavor. As students—and their families—map out their goals for college, their plans and expectations have shifted as well, according to national and institutional data.

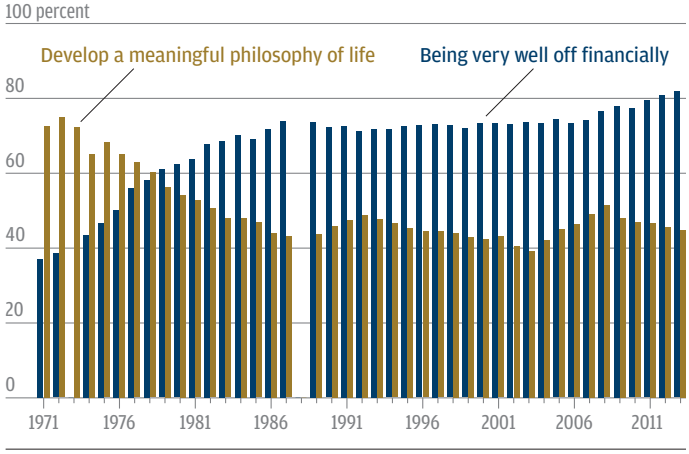
MAJOR TRENDS

Over the past three decades, the most popular majors at Rochester have been in the social sciences, closely followed by the natural sciences, according to data from the College Center for Advising Services. In 1994, the former College of Engineering became part of Arts, Sciences & Engineering and has grown quickly in popularity.



NATIONAL PICTURE

The percentage of American college freshmen who say that higher education will help them meet their financial aspirations has surpassed those who say that college will help them "develop a meaningful philosophy of life" for more than three decades, according to annual survey results from the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA.



SOURCES: College Center for Academic Advising (top); Higher Education Research Institute (bottom)

investment firm, says it would be a shame if current and future generations of students shied away from a liberal arts education because they were concerned about the marketability of their degrees.

An English major at Rochester who did a Take Five project combining economics, finance, biology, and English courses, she says students have little sense for the wide range of opportunities that will be available to them after graduation. Having a rigorous liberal arts background provides not only perspective and analytical skills but also enhances the ability to adapt and be flexible, depending on their professional and personal circumstances, she says.

"Most of the English classes I took had nothing to do with making money, which may be ironic," Nainzadeh says. "But they helped me develop my own perspective on what I was doing in life. And that's what differentiates you in the market. You have to be able to dive into something and do a deep investigation and be able to appreciate it from different points of view. If you can find perspectives that are different from those of others, you can be one step ahead."

Kenneth Gross, the Alan F. Hilfiker Distinguished Professor in English, says such stories can be gratifying for faculty in the humanities. Faculty hope that students discover that their intellectual interests will prepare them for satisfying lives and careers, but they often have little more than anecdotal evidence to support it.

That's why in 2012, he asked about 2,000 graduates to reflect on how their work as English majors stayed with them in later life. Gross, who was then director of undergraduate studies for the English department, is careful to point out that his project was not intended to collect statistical data. He wanted information and details but also, as a literature professor would, he wanted to hear the stories of the department's graduates. About 200 graduates have responded so far, representing a wide range of occupations. They included alumni in fields connected to literature, such as teachers, professors, writers, editors, and others in media, as well as those in finance, medicine, engineering, law, public policy and service, business, manufacturing, and other areas.

None of them answered the survey strictly in terms of financial success. Instead, Gross says, they spoke with energy of how their study of literature increased their powers to think and speak, to write fluently, and to imagine in ways that enhanced their lives and careers. They credited their studies with helping them analyze people's words and arguments, but also to sympathize, and to help them understand better the difficult issues faced by employers, colleagues, and families.

"It was moving to read," Gross says. "No matter what they did after graduating, they saw in their lives, in their relationships, in their career choices, a connection to their work as English majors. They were very alive to what their time at Rochester did for them."

Jonathan Burdick, dean of Admissions and Financial Aid, says prospective students and their parents continue to value a residential college experience.

The curriculum, in particular, has enormous appeal among incoming students because, in many ways, current undergraduates approach college much as graduate students did 25 years ago.

"They have a pretty good idea of what they want to study, they know where they want to go with their education, and they're happy if we stay out of the way," Burdick says. And most, he says, expect that they will need further education—whether formally in graduate school or in other venues—to achieve their goals over the course of their lives.

That requires thinking of education with a broad perspective, Burdick says, and while institutions like Rochester need to be nimble and open to new ideas, the core appeal of the best institutions remains intact. "Students want to be with their peers and be in a learning community," says Burdick.

Having that small, connected community was important to Nainzadeh. "People [at Rochester] really do care about you," she says. "It's big enough where you can meet a lot of different people and still have the sense that there is a lot of opportunity for you to take advantage of. At the same time, it's small enough where you can stand out. You can pursue almost any avenue that you want to. It's all at your fingertips."

Providing that community is expensive, a point not lost on those who have higher education in their political and policy crosshairs. At Rochester the average undergraduate tuition bill was $46,150 for 2014–15, a sticker price that for many students is offset by financial aid and assistance from Rochester's endowment, donor-supported scholarship programs, and other funding sources.

But, counter advocates for liberal education, the cost is worth the investment on behalf of students and their families, as well state and federal programs. As Humphreys of the Association of American Colleges and Universities notes, many colleges provide students a quality liberal education at lower tuition costs than Rochester, but it's incumbent on each institution to make clear how students come out ahead in the long run.

"All the economic data suggest that individually if you get a college degree, it pays off dramatically," she says. "Even if you borrow some money to do it. In the sheer dollars-and-cents analysis, there's no question that it's a good investment of individual time and money. A place like Rochester can certainly point to its graduates' success and say not only is it valuable to get an undergraduate degree in general, but also getting a degree from a place like Rochester is going to set yourself up even more dramatically for success in a knowledge economy."

Antola is willing to attest to that.

"I look back and I feel a little guilty that I didn't apply at the UC schools that would have cost my parents a lot less, but I think you get a lot more out of a Rochester education than you would elsewhere," he says. "When I was applying to business schools, which was on my own dime, I chose Rochester again for the exact same reason. I knew the place. I knew the players. I knew the ease of access to everything that you want to do. It's relevant to real-world learning processes—to figure out what you want to do as much as what you don't want to do. And how, through those experiences, to tailor your education to achieve the goals that you set for yourself."

Those goals and those interests change over time, he says. But the value of a Rochester experience has not.

"I look back on my experiences there—and the farther I get away from my graduation in 1998—the more I look back, the more I realize that it was a great experience, and the resources that I had access to were amazing. To me, the true value of a Rochester education is above and beyond what you do in the classroom." R

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