Valuing a Liberal Arts Education through the Career Lens

If you are concerned that your liberal arts education isn’t going to train you for a specific career, you’re missing the whole point. The value is that it’s preparing you for any career.

—Jennifer Floren, CEO of Experience, a company that has provided innovative recruiting services to colleges, students, and employers since 1996

Many recent graduates lament that their first professional jobs have little intellectual content, aren’t challenging, and require little more than an eighth-grade education. You would expect then, that some of these graduates would question the value of a liberal arts education. In our experience, that rarely happens. And if you asked the twenty-three graduates we’ve profiled in this book, none of them would choose to replace their degrees in philosophy, history, or music with something more practical.

But ask the same question of many members of the general public—including parents—and you’ll find a great deal of ambivalence about the value of a liberal arts education. The difference has to do with how liberal arts graduates and non-graduates perceive the purpose of such an education. While liberal arts graduates see value in the breadth and depth of their education, those without such an education—eyeing more tangible results—often question the value. Indeed the most often cited reason for a college education, according to a recent survey of readers by the Chronicle of Higher Education, was the ability to get good jobs—the kind that pay well. In other words, a money-in, money-out equation—and one that values prompt repayment of education “stock” dividends.

What do we, the authors, think about liberal arts education? We will go out on a limb and say that a liberal arts education is the best investment you could ever make. Pursued with an intellectual curiosity, ideally in pursuit of a passion or two, a wide-ranging roster of college courses endows you with an open-ended ticket for your life’s journey. Used wisely, it allows you to go anywhere and do anything.

Put in the terms of humanistic psychologist Abraham Maslow, a liberal arts education makes “self-actualization”—the pinnacle of human needs—not only possible, but also probable.

This section will lay it all out: the common misunderstandings about a liberal arts education, its relationship to a career, and the ways to take advantage of it. And we’ll let you in on a secret: The benefits of a liberal arts diploma typically don’t come from the subject matter of your degree, whether it’s Spanish, anthropology, or even economics. It’s how you spend your time in college that counts.

Myth #1: Paying for a Liberal Arts Education Is a Lousy Investment

The cost of higher education in the twenty-first century epitomizes the expression “sticker shock.” Attend a highly selective liberal arts college today, and you’re looking at a tuition bill that’s equal to a hefty down payment on a very nice house. And the cost is skyrocketing. According to the College Board, from 1995 to 2005, average tuition and fees, after being adjusted for inflation, grew by 36 percent in private four-year institutions and by 51 percent in public four-year institutions. Even in-state tuition at public universities—which, incidentally, has grown at a much faster rate than the cost of private education—may set you back close to forty thousand dollars. So the obvious question is, whether your liberal arts education is really an investment?
It's clear that for most people, there's an economic advantage to a college degree. As Katherine Haley Will, president of Gettysburg College, reasoned in a 2005 interview with National Public Radio, “Tuition remains a significant investment, but there are few better investments. Twenty years ago, the average college graduate earned 1.5 times more than those who did not graduate; today, the average college graduate earns almost twice as much as nongraduates.” The economic advantage, however, may not be apparent at the beginning of a liberal arts graduate's career. And if you believe the only acceptable investment result is a high salary, you may be disappointed. What your investment buys you is opportunity: opportunity for prosperity, and—something much more important—opportunity to follow your passion, wherever it may lead.

**Myth #2: A Career Is Something You Do If You Can’t Get into Graduate School**

Ask any group of liberal arts students what they intend to do when they graduate, and it won’t be long before you’ll hear some of them say they’re going to law school or medical school. Given the financial rewards and the media’s glamorous depiction of these occupations, who could fault them? Well, we will—at least in some instances. Because in making your decision so early, you’re often closing off opportunities that may better suit your values and interests. Fewer than half of those who originally intended to go to law school or medical school actually end up doing so.

The truth is, you don’t have to make up your mind so early about medical school or scramble to try to get your requirements out of the way. A liberal arts graduate, Mark, who is now a prominent physician, recently commented, “I was not pre-med in college (got scared out of it during my first year), and only started taking pre-med courses a few years after I had graduated. So I tell anyone who has a career to which he or she aspires to hang in there; if you really want it, you can and will do it.”

And there’s the crux of the matter: You have to know what you want to do and then find a way to do it, rather than commit to professional education and then figure out whether it’s a necessary step toward your current career objectives. Too often, graduate or professional school is seen as a default when you can’t think of anything else to do. It’s the acceptable option. The one that will make you seem successful in the eyes of your family and friends. You may also have the erroneous notion that a law degree makes a great canvas for most any career dream. Law school will probably make you a better writer and a more logical thinker. It may also help you with some aspects of business. But if you don’t plan to practice law, you may not find the additional financial reward that you expect.

Our best advice is, if you don’t know for sure that you need a law degree, or any advanced degree, hold off! But by all means, pursue it if you’re certain it will help empower your dreams. Ally, whose story you’ll read in chapter 4, Fulfilling Creative Passions, headed straight to graduate school out of Wake Forest University. She describes her master’s in fine arts as a “three-year root canal,” but she found it invaluable in broadening her career options. Even if you know you’ll need an advanced degree, there may be some financial benefits to waiting to enroll—particularly if the degree you need is in business: some companies offer to pay tuition and expenses. In return, they expect the employee to commit to additional time working for them. Two years out of graduation, Judith found herself in exactly that situation with her employer. It’s worth looking around for organizations that will support your professional development needs.

**Myth #3: A Major Equals a Career, and More Majors Equals Better Careers**

The urge to gather credentials, whether they be professional degrees or college majors, is endemic on college campuses. It seems to be a badge of
Most employers don’t care how many undergraduate majors you have. Moreover, if they’re seeking liberal arts graduates, they also don’t worry about what subject you specialized in. How is it, then, that most of the top investment banking positions and consulting positions, for example, tend to go to students with backgrounds in economics? Employers of liberal arts grads look for interests and skill sets much more than majors. In this case, economics majors tend to be more interested in business than art history majors.

What if you’re a philosophy major who wants to get a highly competitive position in an unrelated field? No, you haven’t studied your way out of that job, but you must make a few strategic “amends”. First, you have to educate yourself, including quizzing all the alumni you can find in your chosen field. Second, you need to build experience, usually through internships. Finally, you need to prepare well, so that you can demonstrate your relevant knowledge and qualifications both in writing and interviews. It’s worth noting that when your major is in a different area from the type of position you seek, a cover letter can make all the difference—if you use it to connect your educational background and skills to your desired goal.

Myth #4: GPA Is Everything

If you were admitted to a top liberal arts school, you’re probably someone who did well on your SAT or ACT exams. So you don’t expect, with a good math SAT score, to struggle in college calculus. But college isn’t high school, and many liberal arts classes can be challenging, particularly if you have to, or choose to, take courses in your areas of weakness. Even in these days of grade inflation, you’re unlikely to end up with a string of As. So what’s the truth about GPA? How important is it?

GPA is a key factor in admissions to graduate and professional school, so if you’re going that route, you’ll need to put extra time and effort into your studies. And according to the Job Outlook 2004, produced by NACE, almost two-thirds of employers screen for employment by GPA. But if you don’t have a stellar GPA, don’t be discouraged. Even though highly competitive positions usually (if unofficially) require a GPA of 3.5, some employers only look for a GPA of 2.5 or more. And many are only concerned that you have a college degree.

It’s important to note that a high GPA—if it’s needed at all—only matters for a first job. After that, your future depends on your performance. (Readers take note: we didn’t ask any of the successful people profiled for this book for their college transcripts.) We all know smart people, who—for whatever reason—didn’t do well in school but blossomed later in life. If you want to overcome a poor GPA, get an internship—paid or unpaid—and prove what you can do.

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The true value of a liberal arts experience has little to do with GPA; it resides in all aspects of your college education—extracurricular activities, summer internships, study abroad, and even late-night debates, be they political or a partisan rehashing of that night’s Red Sox–Yankees game. And it’s from all areas of your liberal arts education that you’ll gain the transferrable skills that will make you a desirable candidate for employment.

Myth #5: A Liberal Arts Education Occurs Only in the Classroom

Education happens in and out of the classroom, but the most useful education requires you to take some initiative.

It’s tempting to plan your academic curriculum around the areas with which you’re familiar and where you know you excel. Don’t! Stretching
yourself and pursuing the unfamiliar can give added value to your liberal arts education. The career advantage shows up in two ways. First, without exception, higher-level professional positions will require you to learn new knowledge and new tasks. Trying classes in subjects you’ve never even heard of in high school will give you the confidence to tackle unfamiliar career assignments later on. Second, you may find that exploring different fields leads to new interests, new experiences, and new skills. KC, in chapter 3, A Life of Service, took a calculus class at the suggestion of a professor. She remained an American studies and history major, but the math course sparked an interest. KC now spends a lot of her time working with numbers as chief financial officer for the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts.

Another way to step outside your comfort zone and build invaluable skills is through study abroad. Jennifer, who is, not surprisingly, in chapter 5, Taking Your Degree Abroad, could be the poster child for foreign study. She spent several semesters of college in Costa Rica, Kenya, and Italy. Unlisted in her course syllabi was one of the biggest lessons she learned in her foreign travels—the ability to relate to all kinds of people in any situation, surely a valuable skill in a global age. By constantly putting herself in new environments, Jennifer developed an equally valuable characteristic: the confidence to do anything.

Here’s an additional piece of advice for liberal arts students considering going abroad: don’t take the easy route. Hundreds of students hardly know they’re actually studying abroad because they spend all their time with their classmates and professors from home. On the surface, it may seem very attractive to go abroad to a place where the natives speak English and where you can while away your time and newfound freedom in the local pub. Resist the temptation. If you follow this path, you may have a fun time, but you will gain little knowledge about yourself or the world.

You don’t have to go abroad to enhance the value of your liberal arts education. Many times you can do so simply by being actively involved in extracurricular activities, as most of the stories in this book so vividly demonstrate.

**Myth #6: A Liberal Arts Education Is a Solitary Affair**

There’s one secret advantage to virtually all residential liberal arts institutions, and that’s people. If you start to truly engage these on-site resources, along with the alumni, you will reap untold rewards.

We encourage students to build at least one strong connection with a faculty member and administrator each semester. Doing so gives you at least eight people at graduation who know you very well and can support your dreams. Every college has dedicated teachers—whether they be faculty, administrators, or even peers. Seek them out. Invite them to lunch. Let them get to know you without a notebook open in front of you.

The true legacy of a liberal arts education is what remains with you after you’ve forgotten 90 percent of the specific information you were taught.

One of the secret advantages of a residential liberal arts experience is the opportunity to engage with all the members of that community—faculty, staff, administrators, and alumni.
Smart Moves for Liberal Arts Grads: Finding a Path to Your Perfect Career

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AND SUZANNE GREENWALD, PhD
CONTENTS

 viii  Dedication
 viii  Credits
 x  Foreword for Students and Graduates
 xiii  Foreword for Parents

1  Smart Moves

2  Can You Get There from Here? The Road and the Map

6  Liberal Arts Students: Stepping into Your Own Career Reality Show

7  The Job Environment: A Rude Awakening to Life and Career
8  The New World of Careers
11  The Blessings and Curses of Parents
14  Making the Most of Your Careers Office
16  Employment Realities for Liberal Arts Graduates
17  Getting the Attention of Employers

20  Valuing a Liberal Arts Education through the Career Lens

21  Myth #1: Paying for a Liberal Arts Education Is a Lousy Investment
22  Myth #2: A Career Is Something You Do If You Can’t Get into Graduate School
23  Myth #3: A Major Equals a Career, and More Majors Equals Better Careers
24  Myth #4: GPA is Everything
25  Myth #5: A Liberal Arts Education Occurs Only in the Classroom
27  Myth #6: A Liberal Arts Education Is a Solitary Affair