



## There Is Value in Liberal Arts Education, Employers Say

Return on investment may be less obvious, but hiring managers seek liberal arts-related skills.

By Mark McNutt  
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With significant attention being paid to the utility of an education within STEM fields (science, technology, engineering and math), liberal arts grads may find themselves asking: What is the value of their liberal arts education?

The prevailing wisdom and research indicate a growing emphasis on and [necessity for career-ready degrees](#) such as computer science, engineering and finance – often included as part of STEM disciplines (science, technology, engineering and mathematics).

At the same time, employers readily identify the creative, communicative and problem-solving acumen traditionally associated with [liberal arts majors](#) as the most valuable attributes of new hires.

With a sluggish job market and companies still [reluctant to reinvest in their workforces](#), the job prospects for all college grads have actually never been clearer: College graduates with career-ready degrees are best positioned to get hired and earn the quickest return on their educational investment.

It's no surprise that technology degree holders continue to be most in demand. But what about graduates with liberal arts degrees?

A report published Sept. 17 may give liberal arts grads a glimmer of circumspect hope.

College seniors who applied for a full-time job and received at least one offer increased by 2 percent in 2014 to nearly 48 percent, thanks to stronger-than-expected job placement for liberal arts degree graduates, according to the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE).

While the report may seem like good news for liberal arts grads, the overall growth in job offers may not indicate an improved job market for all liberal arts majors, according to Edwin Koc, director of research, public policy and legislative affairs at NACE.

"Liberal arts improved pretty much across the board," he says. "But the big jump was for education majors." Koc believes that education majors from a variety of specialties combined to boost overall hiring.

Unfortunately, the improved hiring rate for liberal arts degree graduates may be less about job growth and more about a rebound in state budgets following massive spending cuts in K-12 education in recent years, Koc notes.

"Job placement for education majors has been really, really down," he says. "Since the recession, education majors have had the worst [job] offer rate we've seen, up until this year. And our guess is that it's the opening up of those job opportunities in K-12 education that really made the difference this year for liberal arts graduates."

Despite the caveat, the more obvious career tracks for liberal arts grads – visual and performing arts and communications – gained nearly 25 percent in 2014 over 2013, which is good news for those seeking jobs in public relations and entertainment, the report indicates. But it still leaves many liberal arts grads unemployed and questioning if a liberal arts degree was worth the investment.

Psychology degree graduate Samantha Schuster, who graduated in 2012 from DeSales University, expected her bachelor's degree to earn her a full-time job, but it didn't. With pressure to repay student loans and no job prospects, Schuster says she was forced into yet another big investment: graduate school. She sometimes wonders if she made the right choice.

"I'm glad to be in a graduate program, but sometimes I wonder if going to nursing school would have been better than a bachelor's degree in psychology," she says.

Schuster describes the frustrations of her job search and the dismay wrought from the response of her perspective employers. Of the organizations from which she received replies, no one was willing to hire her because she lacked experience. "But just how does one acquire experience without anyone's willingness to provide you with that experience?" she asks. "It seems like a damaging double-edge sword for a lot of us in the liberal arts field."

NACE's Koc sees the direct technical training and prevalence of internships for students in technology and finance programs as a competitive advantage over liberal arts students.

"If you're a psychology major, the chances of you getting an internship that's directly related to your field is difficult," Koc says. "If it exists at all, it's likely with a nonprofit that may not be in a position to directly hire you after your internship. Engineering, finance and accounting majors, in addition to getting the specific technical education, are interning at companies that are also testing them for full-time jobs. And many of them get direct offers right out of the internship which gives them an advantage over liberal arts graduates."

Notwithstanding the seeming challenges for psychology and other liberal arts grads entering the job market, employers identify the skills often associated with liberal arts majors such as critical thinking, creativity and oral communication as being most important.

A [survey](#) of 400 employers conducted by The Conference Board, Corporate Voices for Working Families, the Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills, and the Society for Human Resource Management found that applied skills such as oral communication, critical thinking, creativity and teamwork "trump basic knowledge and skills, such as reading comprehension and mathematics," for career success.

This is no surprise to Val DiFebo, CEO of Deutsch NY, the New York-based arm of a national advertising agency. DiFebo says the creativity and critical thinking skills associated with liberal arts majors set them apart. For success and innovation in her industry, DiFebo believes a liberal arts education might be better than a specific career-ready degree.

"I find that liberal arts thinkers are the ones that try to problem solve and don't just draw on experiences and skills from school," she says. "When interns tell me they're majoring in marketing, I wonder if that's the smartest thing. This industry changes so rapidly; I'm not sure what you'd learn as a marketing major would prepare you properly for what marketing will look like in the future."

But it's not just creative industries that are seeking liberal arts majors. Boston-based litigation consulting firm Charles River Associates serves the financial services and technology industries but overwhelmingly recruits liberal arts graduates.

"We are hiring almost exclusively from liberal arts schools," explains CRA Vice President Monica Noether.

Noether points to the intellectual curiosity of liberal arts grads and says that it's "exactly the kind of thinking [that] good liberal arts programs do to train their students."

It was intellectual curiosity that led Sam Menzin to Swarthmore College. Although he had every intention to pursue a front-office career in major league baseball, he graduated in 2012 with a degree in history.

"I never considered using my history degree for my career and had always planned to be in professional baseball," he says.

Menzin, who landed a job with the Detroit Tigers organization after graduation, could have chosen a sports management degree but thought a specialized degree would be "limiting." While interning with a sports agent in high school, he says he got some sound advice.

"I had the opportunity to meet with people in baseball that summer, and they told me they don't look for sports management grads. They look for other skills," he explains. "They all told me that the best path to success was to do something I was passionate about. And I always loved history."

With conflicting data and opinions, what's a liberal arts major to think about the future value of his or her degree? It may be that the value of a liberal arts degree has less to do with the degree itself and more to do with where it's earned.

Robert Reich, former U.S. Secretary of Labor and professor of public policy at the University of California—Berkeley, agrees.

"If you have a liberal arts degree that's not from an elite or selective college or university, there's no guarantee you're going to do particularly well," he says. Reich points to the perceived prestige of a school and the strength its alumni networks as key factors.

"There's no question that someone who graduates from Yale has an advantage in getting a job over a graduate from a lesser prestigious university. One of the great benefits of attending an elite college or university is that other students have parents and relatives that have very good, high-paying jobs. So, a network of friends can deliver internships that lead to full-time employment," he says.

However, Reich is quick to point out that, wherever one earns his or her liberal arts degree, having any college degree is important, and bachelor's degree holders earn 60 percent to 80 percent more on average than those without a college degree.

With regard to the future of liberal arts degrees: "My expectation is that if we continue in the same direction, a liberal arts degree will be for most young people a minimum requirement for employment," Reich says. "But it won't guarantee them a good job."

<https://usnews.com/news/college-of-tomorrow/articles/2014/09/22/there-is-value-in-liberal-arts-education-employers-say>