



## Quintessential Careers: Ten Ways to Market Your Liberal Arts Degree

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Let's face it; liberal-arts degrees get a bum rap. Everyone wants to know what in the world you're going to be able to do with that philosophy or history or literature degree. There's lots of material out there about why it's a great idea to major in liberal arts, as well as information on how to choose a career that maximizes your liberal-arts degree. But there's not much written about how to actually market your degree to employers.

There's some disagreement among experts and pollsters about the importance of one's major to employers, but the prevailing opinion is that -- with the exception of some highly specialized and technical fields -- the degree is much more important to employer than what you majored in. That's great news for liberal-arts grads.

Let's assume you're pretty close to graduation and thus, it's probably way too late to change majors (and heck, you wouldn't want to anyway). It's also probably too late to pick up a business minor. Let's assume you have some idea of what you'd like to do for a living -- even if you're not sure whether your liberal-arts degree will take you there. Having participated in internships certainly could boost your currency and help you sell that liberal-arts degree. But let's say that you didn't partake in any internships. Let's say you have to market yourself to employers as a liberal-arts grad virtually on the strength of the degree alone. This article will give you some ideas of how to do that.

### 1. Say It Loud: You're

#### The Value of a Liberal-Arts Education

"I strongly believe in the value of a liberal arts college education. The liberal arts include political science, English, history, philosophy, and related fields. Liberal arts classes tend to focus on ideas and how to handle them, and the courses are organized around reading books, having discussions, and composing papers. The liberal arts curriculum aims to help students achieve two things: 1) to teach them how to think critically, or how to build intellectual muscles that allow them to analyze and organize ideas, and 2) to broaden their understanding of the world by having them grapple with underlying principles and issues that are behind the challenges facing society and themselves. There is a myth that liberal arts degrees do not lead to any jobs, but this is quite untrue. Liberal arts degrees are great preparation for careers in business, teaching, journalism, law, the arts, and many other careers. I would say that liberal arts training is an important preparation for anyone who wants to be a leader in society ... Looking to the future, I

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## Liberal Education and Proud

If you're hanging your head and acting defensive -- or doomed -- when your parents or your friends with business or engineering majors give you a hard time over your "unmarketable" liberal-arts degree, get over it! A liberal-arts degree is a badge of honor! Sought out by many employers, it's a highly versatile ticket to a wide range of jobs. Few jobs are outside the reach of a liberal-arts grad. It's true that I'm biased because I am a card-carrying liberal-arts grad myself. But even if you don't believe me, it's to your advantage to believe in your degree. The more you believe in the great choice of major you made, the better you will be able to market yourself to employers. To pump yourself up even more, read some of the quotes at the right of this page about the value of a liberal-arts education.

Sometimes liberal-arts majors struggle a bit more than other majors when launching their careers, but the evidence shows that they tend to advance farther and be more sought out by CEOs for high-level jobs than non-liberal-arts grads. Writer Todd Larson quotes the director of Stanford University's MBA program as saying his program doesn't prefer applicants who had business as an undergraduate major; instead, liberal-arts majors are among the program's preferred applicants.

While the specialized skills that come with other majors may seem to be an advantage, the universality of liberal-arts skills truly is your ace in the hole because you are not limited by a specialization. Employers can train new hires in specialized skills on the job. But they can't train workers to have the critical-thinking skills, problem-solving skills, and the capacity for lifelong learning that today's organizations

believe that liberal arts training will be even more valuable as American jobs will be increasingly information age jobs where people will be required to effectively manage ideas and information. Liberal arts grads will have the ability to adapt and re-train themselves to take advantage of opportunities that arise in our increasingly dynamic global economy."

-- Timothy Landhuis, a political-science grad interviewed on the Web site of his alma mater, Cal State Easy Bay.

"Liberal arts majors and business majors have different strengths, and both are appropriate for management consulting positions. Liberal arts majors, particularly those in the quantitative or analytic liberal arts (economics, statistics, psychology, life sciences, etc.) have excellent problem solving skills, and are able to frame a problem, consider options and make reasoned decisions based on investigation. Graduates in those areas have been taught how to learn, how to analyze problems and how to use reasoning to reach conclusions. While they may not know the context or language of the business world, they are intelligent and flexible enough to learn quickly.

Business graduates have a more pragmatic approach, and come with relevant studies and knowledge. They know the framework, past precedents and current issues, so they are able to step into a position and perform quickly. As they expend their experience, they are able to apply relevant knowledge to specific business situations and recognize the patterns.

My caveat for liberal arts majors is that they will have to work very hard initially to bridge the knowledge gap with business students, but once they have, they can be talented performers. My caveat for business graduates is that they realize that their education has given them enough knowledge to paint situations with broad strokes, but they need to be flexible to new, untested approaches."

-- John S. Logan, Human Resources Manager, ZS Associates, Princeton, NJ

"A liberal arts education liberates minds and prepares leaders. It emphasizes undergraduate education, high academic standards, and freedom of thought and inquiry. Liberal arts students are exposed to a wide range of ideas, both popular and unpopular."

-- Web page of the School of Liberal Arts, Georgia College & State University

"The Liberal Arts are in great demand. They are a part of every student's curriculum because Liberal Arts' skills and understanding are essential to business, government, science, and, indeed, to all

require. Experts say that most people will change careers five to seven times in a lifetime; thus, specialized skills may be of limited value in the long run, while the depth and breadth of liberal-arts skills are limitless. "Well-rounded" is a modifier frequently applied to liberal-arts grads. Liberal-arts grads can see the "big picture."

## 2. Sell Your Passion

The neat thing about many liberal-arts grads is that they chose their major because they truly loved the subject matter. They were not motivated by what they could do occupationally with the major or how much money they could make after graduating with that major. They were motivated by the pure joy of wanting to learn the field in which they majored.

Sure, there are exceptions -- students who just kind of fell into their majors or those who thought they loved the subject matter but ended up loathing it when it was too late to change majors. But if you're one of those who chose your major because you were passionate about it, you can use that passion in your job search.

Now, the chances are fairly high that many, if not most, of the jobs you'll be looking at will not be directly related to your major. But you can still express your passion for your major to employers. Your passion shows your enthusiasm, your love of learning, your commitment, your dedication.

Chances are, too, that if you loved your major, you have done well academically, and your academic success then becomes another selling point.

## 3. Sharpen Your Focus

The world is truly your oyster as a liberal-arts grad, because unlike, say, a finance major who has been trained for jobs in finance, your training qualifies you for a much wider

intelligent human endeavors. They not only prepare one for the job market, they make life worthwhile.

"The Liberal Arts are the humanities and social sciences, and intelligence and wonder are their springboards. Wondering what causes human societies and cultures to flourish or decline, leads to the study of Anthropology, Economics, Geography, History, Political Science, and Sociology. These disciplines enable us to learn from the past, understand the present, and build hope for the future. Wondering about the human predicament, global cultures, and the stirring eloquence of literature, leads to the study of Communication, English, Foreign Languages, Philosophy, and Religion. These disciplines enable us to write and speak clearly and effectively, to analyze the human condition, and to give expression and understanding to our culture and individuality."

-- Dean of the Indiana University School of Liberal Arts, quoted on the school's Web site

"We have an incredibly good sales force, and we're looking for liberal arts people who have a broad background and are not afraid to get up in front of a crowd of medical students at Yale or Harvard and tell them why they should buy Welch-Allyn products. People that can think on their feet, that have a good sense of humor, that have enough knowledge that they can communicate the benefits of our products to our customers. There we look for liberal arts people."

-- William Allyn, president of Welch Allyn Inc., and chairman and CEO of Welch Allyn Ventures LLC, quoted by Carol Boll in LeMoyne College Magazine

"What is most needed in management today is the ability to think independently and creatively; to function in an imperfect, changing, and ambiguous environment; to make decisions when all the data required to solve the problem are lacking; to negotiate and compromise; to be risk-seeking and entrepreneurial, not to rely on quantitative and analytical data; to recognize short- and long-term implications; to avoid the obvious and solely subjective; to develop effective working relations with peers; to motivate people and resolve conflicts; and to establish effective informational networks. These are all abilities fostered by the liberal arts."

-- Arthur F. (Skip) Oppenheimer, A Businessman Looks at the Values of Liberal Arts, ADE Bulletin

"John Urheim '62 is the chief executive of a technology firm in Colorado. He reports that he is often asked, 'What's a liberal arts graduate doing running a high-tech company?' His response is, 'Who better than a liberal arts graduate?'"

range of careers. But that doesn't mean you should open yourself up to every kind of job or adopt an "I'll do anything" posture. Employers want to know what you want to do, and the more focused you are, the easier it will be to land a job.

As a resume writer I frequently have clients submit resumes to me for critique. When they tell me before sending their resume that they're not sure what they want to do or are open to a number of possibilities, I can always predict that this lack of focus will be reflected in their resumes, and it always is. I tell them that the more sharply they can focus on what they want to do, the better their resumes will be and the easier it will be to get a job. If you're not quite sure what you want to do, seek help from your school's career center.

Assessments are available to help you hone in on careers that align with your skills, values, and interests. And remember when you land that first job, you're not making a lifetime commitment. If the first career you try turns out not to be for you, you can make a change down the road.

#### 4. Your Skills: Know Them, Embrace Them, Market Them

Here's more great news for liberal-arts majors: The skills

that employers almost universally seek are the ones you've gained through your liberal-arts studies. Time and again, research shows that communication skills are by far the skills most sought after by employers. As a liberal-arts major, you have learned to communicate orally and in writing. I found myself, as a liberal-arts grad, teaching in a business school for several years. Because I taught business communication, I required my students, most of them business majors, to do quite a lot of writing. I felt sorry for the business majors in my class who would tell me that they hadn't written anything for their courses since their first-year English classes. I knew their cohorts in liberal arts were writing every semester and polishing skills that would take them far in the workplace.

You probably were required to take a foreign language, while your cohorts in business and other majors may not have been. Language skills and multicultural sensitivity are highly marketable skills in today's workplace.

The list of liberal-arts skills goes on and on, and our colleague, Donald Asher, has developed some great summaries and inventories that help liberal-arts majors realize they have more marketable skills than they knew. Check them out:

- [Liberal Arts Skills That Are Most Useful in Careers](#)
- [Skills and Strengths College Students May Not Realize They Possess -- and That Employers Love](#)
- [College Students: Time to Take Inventory](#)

A. G. Watts, a professor of career development, notes a shift in workplace focus from "what I do" to "what I can

John says that the liberal arts prepared him to think clearly and to understand the relationships between science, market forces, and human behavior. He is prepared to learn and adjust to the unexpected."  
-- Leslie H. Garner Jr., *The Vitality of the Liberal Arts at Cornell College*

"The liberal arts are more than bodies of subject matter -- history, philosophy, literature, mathematics, science, or the social sciences. They are more than vast quantities of information. At their best in the college classroom, they constitute the living legacy of the great thinkers and doers in our -- and the world's -- civilization. In the classrooms of dynamic professors, the liberal arts connect learning to life. Mere note taking will not do; there must be debate, discussion dialogue among students and faculty; students must learn to defend and communicate their thoughts and beliefs, in well-argued oral and written discourse. Every career is enriched by such an education."

-- Dr. Thomas R. McDaniel, senior vice president at Converse College, *The Practicality of a Liberal Arts Education*, published in the *Chattanooga Times Free Press* and on the Converse Web site

"Liberal arts education is the knowledge matrix of the global competitive environment. With its cultivation of scientific, social and cultural literacy, it prepares the student for an increasingly diverse and complex world. With its development of critical and analytical skills, it prepares the student to grasp the direction of the changes that sweep over us. It is the education that mirrors the world in which we live and shapes the leaders we require."

-- Richard J. Scaldini, *Making the Case for Liberal Education*, excerpted from the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, July 9, 2002, and published on the Web site of the Association of American Colleges and Universities

do." Liberal-arts majors in particular are the "what I can do" people.

### 5. Give Your Skills a Little Boost

Despite the wonderfulness of the liberal-arts degree, there are a few skills that liberal-arts students could stand to polish to add to their marketability. While it may be too late to change your major, it's not too late to enhance your skill set just a bit. Computer skills, for example, are a must in the vast majority of jobs, and if your liberal-arts studies left you deficient in computer literacy, you can still take a class to beef up those skills, whether at your college or at one of the many technical schools that offer computer classes. You may even be able to take a class online or have a computer-geek friend tutor you.

If you're interested in a career in business, and it's too late to take business classes, you can still learn a lot by reading such publications as the *Wall Street Journal*, *Business Week*, *Forbes*, and *Fortune*, watching business programs on CNBC, and visiting Web sites, such as [Fast Company](#) and [Business 2.0](#). Gain exposure to business environments by conducting informational interviews. [Read more.](#)

The key is to study want ads and Internet job postings for the types of jobs you're interested in and see what skills are required. If there's a skill or two you're deficient in but that keep popping up in the descriptions of interesting jobs, there's probably a relatively painless way for you get up to speed with that skill.

### 6. Let Your Resume Sing the Praises of a Liberal-Arts Education

Most resumes today have a handy little section called a Profile or Qualifications Summary that's terrific for encapsulating your skills and the value you can bring to an employer. It's also a great place to highlight your liberal-arts skills.

I prepared a resume for a college student earning his degree in Social Thought and Analysis, which is about as liberal-artsy as you can get. Though he had great extracurricular activities, sports, and computer experience, he had virtually no work experience. He was interested in a job at one of the big financial-services companies. He didn't have any training or background in finance, but he sure did have lots of skills that employers love. Here's how I made the most of his liberal-arts background in his resume's summary section:

- Leadership-oriented college student with strong work ethic and moral compass.
- Creative problem-solver who excels at conflict resolution, as well as creating positive solutions, identifying efficient methods to correct situations, and following through to implementation.
- Exceptional interpersonal communicator who collaborates effectively with individuals at all levels -- from students to deans, functions as a liaison among groups, builds and leads teams without being overbearing, and fosters cooperation among diverse individuals and organizations.
- Disciplined and highly organized self-starter who coordinates, manages, and juggles multiple committees, numerous daily meetings, judicial-board and campus ambassador functions, as well as a demanding school load.
- Motivated, mature achiever who takes the initiative and attacks issues with originality.
- Committed competitor who has demonstrated drive toward excellence through achievement of three-time election to class-president position and third-degree black belt in karate.
- Computer-proficient performer with skills covering operating systems, including Windows 9x/ME/2K/XP, and Mac OS, as well as software applications and programming languages, including C++, Java, HTML, Excel, PowerPoint, Minitab, Access, Word, and Outlook; A+ certified.

### 7. Enlist Your Cover Letter in Portraying the Applicability of Your Skills

Your cover letter can also play a significant role in touting your liberal-arts skills. While the resume is usually written in short, clipped bullet points, the cover letter uses more narrative language to help the employer to see the connections between your liberal-arts skills and the employer's needs. When brainstorming skills to describe in your cover letter, remember that your total college experience helped you develop skills. Your involvement in extracurricular groups probably showed your leadership and teamwork skills. Teamwork is also the hallmark of most sports, as is competitive drive.

This [section of our Cover Letter Tutorial](#) lists outside-the-classroom venues that can be used in a cover letter (the section also includes sample verbiage) to show how your experiences apply to the employer's needs. [Another Tutorial section](#) gives more examples of transferable, applicable skills and provides cover-letter examples of students who described how their typical college jobs (such as restaurant server and retail sales associate) helped them develop skills applicable to the jobs they sought. Finally, [this article](#) suggests classroom-based skills that can be used in cover letters.

And one more cover-letter bonus: Your cover letter is a showcase for your writing skills. The very fact that your

liberal-arts education has prepared you to craft a compelling, well-written cover letter will make a big impression on employers.

### 8. Consider a Portfolio

Creating a portfolio to take on interviews gives you the opportunity to show your liberal-arts skills in a very tangible way. As noted earlier, for example, liberal-arts students tend to do a lot more writing than their business counterparts. Thus, placing writing samples in a portfolio is a great way to show off your liberal-arts advantage. Your college years likely yielded lots of other items you can compile into a portfolio to show employers. Learn more in our article, [Your Job Skills Portfolio: Giving You an Edge in the Marketplace](#).

### 9. Give Job Interview Responses a Liberal-Arts Spin

I once had a student who, when asked in a mock interview if he was a team player, told the interviewer that he had worked on 35 group projects during his college career. Thirty-five group projects!? Wow, had I been an employer, I would have been highly impressed and convinced that he had learned a lot about teamwork during all those projects.

You can similarly use your liberal-arts skills when responding to interview questions.

Take the popular interview question, "Why should I hire you?" The unspoken full version of this question is "Why should I hire you over every other candidate? What makes you special?" Here's a good liberal-arts way to answer the question:

"Because I know that the one constant in organizational life today is change. I know your company will undergo change, and my strong liberal-arts education has prepared me with the flexibility to adapt to the changes I'll inevitably face."

And another:

"The cultural awareness I've developed as a result of my solid liberal-arts education prepares me to collaborate in a team-oriented and diverse workforce."

Or how about if the employer is even more explicit: "Why should I hire you over a graduate who has business training?"

"Because one of the hallmarks of the excellent liberal-arts education I've attained is the ability to learn. I'm confident I can get up to speed quickly and meet your needs in this job. My education has also prepared me to be an articulate written and oral communicator, so I know I can be a real asset to your firm."

### 10. Ask Yourself if You'd Be More Marketable with Grad School

Clearly, your career marketability is far from the only reason to consider grad school. But there are some fields, such as social work, in which opportunities are extremely limited with a bachelor's degree but considerably better with a master's degree. If your career path dictates grad school right away, or you truly want to earn an advanced degree, go for it.

But consider the grad-school option only if it's truly right for your situation. If you've feel you've had enough of school for awhile and are eager to get into the "real world," maintain a positive attitude about the value of your liberal-arts degree. Don't be a defeatist who says, "I guess I'll just have to go to grad school" if your job search is not successful right away. Be confident that your liberal-arts degree will open up a whole world of opportunity for you.

### Additional Resources

For exploring careers that are a good fit with your major, see:

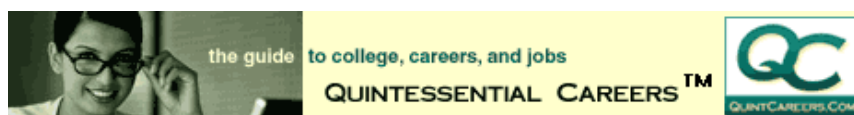
- Our [Career Exploration Tools and Resources](#), and particularly check out [Ashland University's What Can I Do with a Major In...?](#)
- [Liberal Arts -- What's It Good For?](#), a nice handout from Muhlenberg College
- [Some Ideas for Liberal Arts Majors Thinking about Careers](#)



- [The Role of Liberal Arts in Your Future](#)
- [Dear Liberal Arts Students](#)

Questions about some of the terminology used in this article? Get more information (definitions and links) on key college, career, and job-search terms by going to our [Job-Seeker's Glossary of Job-Hunting Terms](#).

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