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Another case for the liberal arts

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Quad 136

Another Case for the Liberal Arts

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Another Case for the Liberal Arts



Photo: Tommy O’Laughlin ’13

The historic model of higher education was built on the medieval trivium and quadrivium, but liberal arts in the 21st century have been the object of much recent criticism (see [here](#) , [here](#), and [here](#)). Politicians, many employers, parents and students have come to emphasize the importance of vocational skills, which are often equated with STEM or technical fields. Even President Obama, a product of Occidental and Columbia, has taken a [swipe](#) at art history majors—though he later regretted having done so.

Not surprisingly, many educators have risen to the defense of the liberal arts, but support for a broad-based, non-vocational education has recently come from what might be considered an unlikely source: *The Wall Street Journal*. In a recent article, author George Anders explores the career paths of college graduates and reports in the headline, “[Good News Liberal-Arts Majors: Your Peers Probably Won’t Outearn You Forever.](#)” He discovers the unsurprising fact that the first job out of college does not determine one’s career path. As the table below shows, as liberal art majors enter the peak earning years in their 40s and 50s, they do as well or better than those with more vocationally oriented majors. (I would also note that these data emphasize the humanities and social sciences, but of course the natural sciences are part of the liberal arts and sciences too.)

How Pay Stacks Up

Median annual earnings for select liberal-arts and other degrees, based on years of experience.

LIBERAL-ARTS MAJORS	0-5 yrs	10-20 yrs	20+ yrs
English lang. & literature	\$39,000	\$69,000	\$73,000
History	41,000	72,000	81,000
International relations	44,000	74,000	119,000
Philosophy	42,000	82,000	97,000
Political science	43,000	77,000	89,000
Psychology	38,000	60,000	69,000

OTHER MAJORS

Accounting	\$47,000	\$73,000	\$84,000
Business management	45,000	69,000	81,000
Civil engineering	56,000	89,000	108,000
Computer science	63,000	103,000	116,000
Hospitality management	39,000	60,000	70,000
Nursing	57,000	73,000	75,000

Note: Data is for bachelor's degree Source: PayScale

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Some employers will seek vocational prep in the short run, but as they look to promote individuals into leadership and management roles in the longer run, liberal arts skills come to the fore. As Anders writes:

In the short-term, employers still say they prefer college graduates with career-tailored majors. A recent survey of 180 companies by the National Association of Colleges and Employers found that at least 68% want to hire candidates who majored in business or engineering. By contrast, only 24% explicitly want communications majors, 21% want social-sciences majors and 10% humanities majors.

When asked to define the résumé traits that matter most, however, the NACE-surveyed employers rated technical skills 10th. Four of the top five traits were hallmarks of a traditional liberal-arts education: teamwork, clear writing, problem-solving aptitude and strong oral communications. Mindful of those longer-term needs, some employers end up hiring humanities and social-sciences graduates, even if such majors aren't explicitly singled out when recruiting.

*"It's easier to hire people who can write—and teach them how to read financial statements—rather than hire accountants in hopes of teaching them to be strong writers," says Liz Kirschner, head of talent acquisition at Morningstar Inc.**

Another recent *Wall Street Journal* article makes a similar point. In an [article](#) entitled, “Employers Find ‘Soft Skills’ Like Critical Thinking in Short Supply: Companies put more time and money into teasing out job applicants’ personality traits,” author Kate Davidson writes that:

The job market’s most sought-after skills can be tough to spot on a résumé.

Companies across the U.S. say it is becoming increasingly difficult to find applicants who can communicate clearly, take initiative, problem-solve and get along with co-workers.

Those traits, often called soft skills, can make the difference between a standout employee and one who just gets by. While such skills have always appealed to employers, decades-long shifts in the economy have made them especially crucial now. Companies have automated or outsourced many routine tasks, and the jobs that remain often require workers to take on broader responsibilities that demand critical thinking, empathy or other abilities that computers can’t easily simulate.

While one can quibble about whether the term “soft skills” carries a mildly pejorative connotation, the skills described—critical thinking, clear communication, teamwork—are among those emphasized in a broad based liberal arts education and those that are likely to be increasingly attractive to employers.

A great liberal arts education is about preparation for a lifetime and the skills emphasized in that education have and will continue to serve liberal arts graduates and students well as they seek advancement and opportunities throughout their careers.

* The beauty of the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John’s University accounting majors is they can both write and read a financial statement, which is why they often end up as CFOs or CEOs.

By [Michael Hemesath](#) | September 22nd, 2016 | Categories: [Economics](#), [Higher Education](#) | [0 Comments](#)

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Michael Hemesath is the 13th president of Saint John's University. A 1981 SJU graduate, Hemesath is the first layperson appointed to a full presidential term at SJU. You can find him on Twitter [at] [PrezHemesath](#).