

# A Liberal Arts degree: What's it worth?

by Mark Wright

**T**he one question liberal arts majors repeatedly ask themselves is if their degrees will get them good jobs upon graduation.

The most popular answer to that question has been that a liberal arts degree is no help at all. At best it might open a few doors.

In the '80s, the trend of "arts-bashing" has created the impression that an arts education does not prepare students for the work force. The private sector will not be interested in you when you leave university because you have no skills, is a common misperception.

As we enter the '90s, it seems that the message is beginning to change.

"There is a growing interest amongst employers to look at graduates with liberal backgrounds," says John Harries, director of York's career and placement centre.

"Research indicates that in the changing workplace, employers want liberal arts students who know how to learn and won't burn out in 10 years."

Harries believes there is a revolution going on. Dealing with new technology is changing the shape of work and is creating a lot of pressure in the work place.

Employers want people who can sort through all the issues and reports and make sense out of it all and come up with some solutions, he says.

Lynn McLeod, former Ontario minister of colleges and universities, gave a speech last April about liberal arts education. She said the message she was hearing from senior executives and strategic planners of companies was positive.

"They want employees who are flexible, who can think and communicate: people who can be trained for jobs that may develop and emerge. A liberal arts education is the best possible spawning ground for these characteristics," she said.

A senior vice-president at a major bank (and a York grad) encourages people to spend the time to get a good liberal arts education. "Regardless of where you are going... it's such a broad flexible foundation to begin with," he reasons.

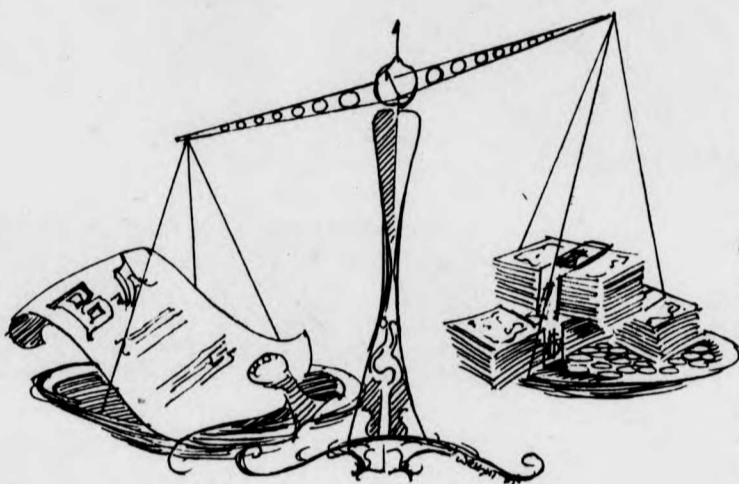
In a study of AT&T employers in the United States, it was found that liberal arts majors had the best overall performances as compared with those employees with science, engineering or business backgrounds. These employees had strong decision-making abilities, were very creative and excelled in interpersonal and oral communication skills.

York's career centre has a list of 76 career related liberal arts skills. It was prepared after consultation with employers, students and faculty members from 22 disciplines in the humanities and social sciences.

The list outlines a number of skills that include informa-

tion management, design and planning, research and investigation, oral and written communication skills, human relations, and critical analysis.

Even though liberal arts students would seem to be bankable as employees, there are still some problems which must be overcome. One of these is the general perception the business world has of students with liberal arts backgrounds. A number of companies questioned the ability of these people to commit themselves to the business world.



Another problem seems to be the lack of communication between senior and middle management in firms.

While the former are calling for more people with liberal arts educations, the latter are faced with the problem of filling positions quickly and meeting short term needs.

Harries feels the country will pay for this lack of vision on the part of middle management down the road.

"At some point they're going to be forced to look ahead, past next week," he says.

Students can overcome these problems by being professional when they enter the workforce. "What I'm finding is that most of the problems students are facing when they try to get jobs are because they are using job search skills which are nine years old," Harries says.

Finding a good job, and more specifically a good career, can no longer be accomplished by just sending out 100 resumes and waiting to see what will turn up, he says. "Students really need to market themselves."

This begins with getting some job experience in a field you're interested in and it's important to do this while

you're in school. Not only is it practical, but it also shows employers you have initiative and a genuine commitment to the field, he says.

Students should even sacrifice other, perhaps higher paying, summer jobs which may not be related to the area they are interested in. Getting experience through volunteer work is another way of accomplishing this. It can make all the difference between getting a job or not.

Harries says the biggest reason for doing this is that in today's market place 80 to 90 per cent of all work is found through networking. That is, getting to know people in the field who will help you find work when you finish school.

"I think students need to complete a career and life assessment. Following that they need to design themselves a job search strategy," he says.

The assessment begins by trying to focus on interests, making choices and planning out goals. Once students have a focus they should research the field and begin to develop contacts.

If you are struggling with what career or direction you should go, you do not need to panic. York's career centre offers vocational testing to help students find careers that might be most suited to them.

Associate dean of the faculty of arts Deborah Hobson believes a degree will give students skills which are fundamental to everything they do in life. She also stresses the importance of the individual in working to make things happen.

"It isn't reasonable for people to think that when they leave university they'll get a job right away. People just don't realize how important individual initiative matters in the world," she says.

Don Willows, head of personnel of The Future Shop, a chain of retail stores, believes that a liberal arts degree is good to have, but that when you are just starting out being a dynamic person is also very important.

"We want goal-oriented people who want to go places, who are aggressive and hard working," he says.

Associate dean of academics Tom Beechie feels a liberal arts diploma will give students the rounded view of the world they will need when they enter the business sector.

"The whole idea of an education is to prepare a person for society. A person has to have an understanding of society before they can really know business," he says.

Harries adds that a liberal arts degree will probably have a sleeper effect and that its true value may not be realized until later in a person's career.

"The degree will probably not be appreciated until people have been in a career for a while. They will start out at the bottom with everyone else but when the time comes for a promotion management will choose the person with higher education," he says. "You can take a computer course over three months, but it takes three years to get a BA."

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