What can I do with a Liberal Arts Degree?

The Answer: most anything you want. Helpful?

That answer is common (and truthful), but doesn’t feel helpful when you are confused about your career direction. So let’s look at it from another angle.

What value do employers place on a Liberal Arts degree?

The Answer is reflected in the research. In a recent (American Academy of Colleges and Universities (AACU) survey, and Surveys conducted by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE)

By the numbers…why employers like liberal arts

Here are some results from a recent AACU survey of hundreds of employers. Below are employer’s top ranking of what they think is most important for new undergraduate hires

84% Complete a significant project AND acquire analytical, problem-solving, and communication skills  
(this is accomplished by the Willamette Senior Project – a real advantage in the job market)

81% Complete an internship or community-based field project to connect classroom learning with real-world experiences (Willamette students have many opportunities to do internships either paid, non-paid, or for academic credit through IDS194)

81% Develop the skills to research questions in their field (This is accomplished by liberal arts curriculum through final papers, case studies, analysis and reading)

73% Expecting students to work through ethical issues and debates to form their own judgments about the issues at stake (This is accomplished by volunteer and community service programs such as TAB, tutoring, and community programs and discussing it with faculty and peers)

60% Expecting students to learn about cultural and ethnic diversity in the context of the United States and the world  
(This is accomplished through Study Abroad or summer overseas programs, the language requirement, and core curriculum courses)
Figure 34: Employers rate the importance of candidate skills/qualities

(5-point scale, where 1=not important; 2=not very important; 3=somewhat important; 4=very important, 5 = extremely important)

- Communication skills 4.7
- Strong work ethic 4.6
- Initiative 4.5
- Interpersonal skills (relates well to others) 4.5
- Problem-solving skills 4.5
- Teamwork skills (works well with others) 4.5
- Analytical skills 4.4
- Flexibility/adaptability 4.3
- Computer skills 4.2
- Detail-oriented 4.1
- Leadership skills 4.1
- Technical skills 4.1
- Organizational skills 4.0
- Self-confidence 3.9
- Tactfulness 3.8
- Friendly/outgoing personality 3.7
- Creativity 3.6
- Strategic planning skills 3.3
- Entrepreneurial skills/risk-taker 3.2
- Sense of humor 3.0

Figure 31: Employers rate the influence of attributes when deciding on two equally qualified candidates

- Has held leadership position 4.0
- Major 3.9
- High GPA (3.0 or above) 3.6
- Has been involved in extracurricular activities (clubs, sports, student government, etc.) 3.6
- School attended 3.0
- Has done volunteer work 3.0

Figure 32: Employers hiring preferences relative to experience, by percent of respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hiring preference</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2008</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I prefer to hire candidates with relevant work experience</td>
<td>76.6%</td>
<td>76.3%</td>
<td>76.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I prefer to hire candidates with any type of work experience</td>
<td>15.9%</td>
<td>18.9%</td>
<td>18.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(doesn’t matter if it’s relevant, just some type of experience)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work experience typically doesn’t factor into my decision</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decision when hiring a new college graduate</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>5.0%*</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
<td>0.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* The 5 percent of employers who indicated “other” hiring preferences further defined the specific type of relevant work experiences that they prefer. In general, these respondents cited internships or co-ops as their
Figure 35: Employers rank the top five candidate skills/qualities

1. Communication skills
2. Analytical skills
3. Teamwork skills (works well with others)
4. Technical skills
5. Strong work ethic

Figure 36: Skills Lacking in new college graduates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skill/Quality</th>
<th>Percent of Respondents Who Said Skill/Quality Is Lacking</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Communication Skills</td>
<td>49.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexibility/adaptability</td>
<td>37.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tactfulness</td>
<td>35.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initiative</td>
<td>28.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teamwork skills</td>
<td>27.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational</td>
<td>22.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong work ethic</td>
<td>20.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Conclusion: What this data tells you

1. Employers want to hire people like you who developed the very skills, experiences, and attributes that you practiced as a liberal arts student. Your liberal arts degree is great preparation for the world of work.

2. You must be able to explain your skills, experiences and attributes to employers by citing specific examples of how you communicated, solved problems, provided leadership, researched, and learned to respect cultural differences in others.

3. Your major may not be as important as personal qualities and experience. Other than employers in technical, scientific and specialty industries, your major is less important than your personal attributes. Your job is to highlight your attractive background in resumes, cover letters, applications, and during interviews. The Career Center can help you do that.

4. A liberal arts degree is valuable in the job market. Now embrace it and articulate it.