

NACE Research: The Liberal Arts Graduate College Hiring Market

By Edwin W. Koc



and the



Many years ago when I taught political science at a small liberal arts college, I would frequently be asked by a student what he or she could do with a degree in political science outside of teaching high school or going to law school.

Since I wasn't the only faculty member being asked this question, the department chair decided to put up a list of the occupations that recent graduates from the department held after receiving their degrees. The list included jobs such as real estate agent, insurance adjuster, salesman, market researcher, and so on. The nexus with the material imparted in political science classes was completely lost on my students. What is it that you learn in political science that specifically prepares you for being a real estate agent? The answer is—nothing. Political science along with a host of other academically oriented majors, which we often refer to as “the liberal arts,” does not directly prepare a student for a specific occupation. The objective of a liberal education, as I strained to explain to my students, is to prepare you broadly for the professional world so that you are prepared to undertake many jobs rather than to be trained to do a specific task.

Until the 1970s, a student's major field of study did not matter much when it came to job prospects after graduation. It was at that point that a college degree did not virtually automatically ensure employment.¹ Employers became more selective in the way they sourced their graduate recruits. They also looked to expedite the transition of these recruits from

the classroom to the workplace while minimizing costs associated with the transition. This led employers to place greater emphasis on the development of specific job-related skills in the educational backgrounds of their recruits—an emphasis that could be easily identified by the academic major connected with the student's degree. Today, as surveys of our employer members reveal, academic major is the prime consideration in both targeting schools at which to recruit and which students at a target university are most likely to be in demand.²

The result is that there is no longer a single college hiring market but two broad markets. One market is focused on the career-oriented majors such as business administration, accounting, engineering, and computer science; the other deals with the more broadly academically oriented disciplines such as English, history, the language arts, and the social and physical sciences. The latter of these two, the liberal arts market and the liberal arts graduate, is the focus of this article.³

Who Majors in the Liberal Arts?

Are the students who major in the liberal arts today demographically different than their counterparts in the career-oriented disciplines? Has there been a change in the relative balance between those who concentrate in the career-oriented majors vs. those in majoring in the liberal arts and sciences since the labor market for college graduates became competitive?

Although the hiring atmosphere has been competitive for college recruits for the past 40 years, there has been very little change in the distribution of bachelor's degree holders between career-oriented and academically oriented (liberal arts) majors. In 1970-71, 41 percent of the degrees awarded went to students majoring in the liberal arts.⁴ The Class of

2009 saw 1,600,000 students receive bachelor's degrees. Of these, 650,000 students majored in one of the liberal arts or sciences—40.7 percent. This may seem surprising at first. The employment and professional landscape for college graduates has changed substantially since the 1970s so it is unexpected that the percentage of students studying in liberal arts disciplines has remained essentially the same.

This is not to say that there has been *no* change in the profile of graduating classes by discipline (academic major) since 1971. However, the significant changes are *within* the career-oriented disciplines rather than *between* the liberal arts and those career-oriented majors. The single largest shift that has occurred during this time period is the abandonment of education as a major in favor of business. The percent of graduates who majored in education fell from 21 percent in 1970-71 to just over 7 percent by 2004-05. (See Figure 1.) By contrast, the proportion of graduates majoring in a business concentration grew from 13.7 percent in the early '70s to nearly 22 percent today.

There are also very few demographic differences that distinguish graduates with liberal arts degrees from those that come out of the career-oriented fields. Figure 2 details the gender and ethnic breakouts for the two types of degree programs from the Class of 2009. The data suggest that the ethnic distribution for the two groups is essentially the same. There is no ethnic category where the difference in the proportion of the group among the two different major types exceeds 2 percent. There is, however, a relatively substantial difference in the percent of each group that is composed of women. Women constitute 55 percent of career-oriented majors and somewhat more than 60 percent of liberal arts majors. In addition, women make up only 40 percent of the career-oriented majors that employers recruit the most heavily—accounting,



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Figure 1: Bachelor's degrees conferred by degree-granting institutions, by discipline division: Selected years, 1970-71 through 2004-05⁵

Discipline division	1970-71	1980-81	1990-91	2000-01	2004-05
Biological and biomedical sciences	4.2%	4.6%	3.6%	4.8%	4.5%
Business	13.7%	21.4%	22.8%	21.2%	21.6%
Communication, journalism, and related programs	1.2%	3.1%	4.7%	4.7%	5.1%
Computer and information sciences	0.3%	1.6%	2.3%	3.5%	3.8%
Education	21.0%	11.6%	10.1%	8.5%	7.3%
Engineering	5.4%	6.8%	5.7%	4.7%	4.5%
English language and literature/letters	7.6%	3.4%	4.7%	4.1%	3.8%
Foreign languages, literatures, and linguistics	2.5%	1.2%	1.3%	1.3%	1.3%
Health professions and related clinical sciences	3.0%	6.8%	5.5%	6.1%	5.6%
Liberal arts and sciences, general studies, and humanities	0.9%	2.3%	2.8%	3.1%	3.0%
Mathematics and statistics	3.0%	1.2%	1.3%	0.9%	1.0%
Multi/interdisciplinary studies	0.8%	1.4%	1.6%	2.2%	2.1%
Philosophy and religious studies	1.0%	0.7%	0.7%	0.7%	0.8%
Physical sciences and science technologies	2.5%	2.6%	1.5%	1.4%	1.3%
Psychology	4.5%	4.4%	5.4%	5.9%	5.9%
Social sciences and history	18.5%	10.7%	11.4%	10.3%	10.9%
Visual and performing arts	3.6%	4.3%	3.9%	4.9%	5.6%

business administration, engineering, and computer science.⁶

The difference between the proportion of men and women that make up liberal arts graduates presents something of a confounding situation. Are the differences that liberal arts graduates show with respect to the job market the result of differences in how liberal arts graduates are treated by the labor market or the outcome of how women fare within the market? NACE analyzed this question in some detail in the *2010 Student Survey* report. The analysis showed that both major and gender had independent impacts on many of the outcomes related to how graduates fared in the labor market. However, beyond differences related to salary the dominant factor tended to be academic major.⁷

Plans After Graduation

There is a stark difference in what graduates in the liberal arts disciplines expect to do after graduation compared with students graduating from a career-oriented major.

Whereas 75 percent of students with defined plans in career-oriented fields expect to enter the civilian work force directly after graduation, only a bit more than half (53 percent) of those from liberal arts fields expect to go to work directly after getting their degree. The big difference is that many more students in the academically oriented liberal arts do not see their bachelor's degree as terminal. Nearly 40 percent of liberal arts graduates expect to continue on

to another degree level before they begin looking for a job. (See Figure 3.) Additionally, twice the proportion of liberal arts graduates plan on taking the year after graduation off to travel or on entering the military.

The proportion of graduates in the academically oriented arts and sciences who plan to go to graduate school may have a significant impact on the way the labor market treats liberal arts graduates in general. Such a large proportion of students who voluntarily absent themselves from the labor pool is bound to include some of the most potentially attractive students to a possible recruiter. Therefore, the pool of candidates from the liberal arts and sciences may be significantly distorted in such a



Figure 2: Gender and ethnic distribution by academic major type (bachelor's degrees, class of 2009)⁸

	Total	Women	Native-Amer.	Asian-Amer.	African-Amer.	Hispanic-Amer.	White	Inter.
Liberal arts & sciences graduates	653,208	393,109	3,804	44,890	44,871	48,013	363,321	16,876
% Liberal arts graduates		60.2%	0.6%	6.9%	6.9%	7.4%	55.6%	2.6%
Career-oriented graduates	949,912	523,642	4,591	49,106	77,063	58,169	533,664	29,060
% Career-oriented graduates		55.1%	0.5%	5.2%	8.1%	6.1%	56.2%	3.1%

manner that virtually determines the outcomes of the job search related to these majors.

In addition, those liberal arts majors who are planning on entering the work force are aiming at very different sectors of the work force than are those graduating with a career-oriented degree. (See Figure 3.) Just over 45 percent of all graduates with career-oriented majors are planning on finding a job in the for-profit, private sector; by contrast, only 20 percent of those graduating with one of the academically oriented degrees are aiming at finding a job in the for-profit, private sector. Rather than going into the dominant sector of the economy, the liberal arts graduate is equally, if not slightly more, inclined to prefer a position with a nonprofit or public sector entity. More than 24 percent of those graduating in one of the academic fields plan to seek a position with either a nonprofit or a state or federal government agency.

The differences shown in Figure 3 are not simply a reflection of the current economic climate. They are more deep-rooted and may be connected with a fundamentally different view of the world held by the liberal arts graduate. This appears to be the case when these students were asked which industries they would consider for a career after graduation. Figure 4 displays the results contrasting the responses of seniors majoring in a career-oriented field with

those from the academically oriented liberal arts and sciences.

Figure 4 essentially confirms the divisions identified in Figure 3, not only for those seniors intending on entering the work force directly after college, but for all seniors, including those who are planning to attend graduate or professional school. In choosing industries that held a career interest, the students were not limited to a single choice. They could identify as many as they wished. The fact that there continued to be the overwhelming separation between liberal arts graduates and career-oriented students when it came to industry preferences regarding business, government, and human services is telling.

The implications related to the immediate plans for after graduation and the more long-term career objectives are particularly evident when comparing student expectations regarding compensation. Students graduating from one of the liberal arts and sciences expect an initial starting salary significantly below that expected by students graduating in one of the career-oriented disciplines. Figure 5 shows the distribution of starting salary expectations for both groups of students. Overall, the median starting salary expected by a student from a career-oriented discipline is \$40,307; the median starting salary for a student graduating in the liberal arts is \$32,699, or approximately 19 percent less. (It should be noted that the differences

here are somewhat muted by the fact that education majors are included with the career-oriented disciplines. Education majors have relatively low starting salary expectations that are more in line with the median expectations for the liberal arts disciplines than they are with the other career-oriented majors.)

Competing in the Labor Market

A smaller percentage of liberal arts graduates plan on entering the work force directly out of college. The career direction of those that do plan to work is decidedly different than those students graduating with a career-oriented major. But, do those entering the labor force approach finding a job differently? Does the market reward them at the same level as their career-oriented brethren?

Looking at student responses to the 2010 *Student Survey*, the liberal arts major was just as likely to have begun a search for a full-time job before graduation as was the business or engineering major. In fact, those liberal arts students who were planning on entering the work force showed a slightly more aggressive posture to finding a job. When asked whether they had begun looking for a job prior to graduation, 99.6 percent of the liberal arts graduates who were planning on entering the work force responded "yes." By comparison, 85 percent of the career-oriented grads

planning on entering the work force had begun their job search prior to graduation.

The problem for these liberal arts majors is that they found fewer opportunities, or at least they felt like there were fewer opportunities, than was the case for the career-oriented majors who chose to start their search before graduation. A smaller percentage of liberal arts graduates who were looking for a job chose to apply for at least one job than did the career-oriented majors. Just under 76 percent of the career-oriented majors found an opportunity that both appealed to them and for which they felt qualified enough that they applied for the position. By comparison, only 66 percent of liberal arts majors entering the work force found themselves in the same position.

Are there truly fewer opportunities for the liberal arts major, or is this more of a self-selection process? Is the liberal arts major simply less aggressive, “less committed,” when it comes to looking for an opportunity for employment?

The data from NACE’s student survey suggest that on average the liberal arts major does not pursue a job as aggressively as does the career-oriented major. First, liberal arts majors are less likely to prepare themselves for entering the job market as extensively as the career-oriented majors. Results from the *2010 Student Survey* showed that there was a positive impact on finding a job and getting a higher starting salary from having an internship experience during the college career.⁹ Liberal arts graduates are less likely to have had such an experience. Slightly more than 49 percent of liberal arts respondents who were looking for a job reported having had an internship or co-op assignment prior to graduation, compared with 58 percent of job-seeking career-oriented majors.

Second, students who took advantage of the advice and support that they found at their career centers also had a slight edge in locating employment

Figure 3: Plans after graduation

	Career-oriented	Academic
	% of Respondents	
Begin own business	2.0%	1.6%
Grad or prof school	21.1%	39.0%
State or local gov’t	2.9%	6.5%
Federal gov’t	2.6%	3.9%
Military	0.5%	1.2%
Nonprofit	8.7%	13.9%
Private sector	45.1%	20.1%
Teach	13.8%	7.4%
Travel	3.2%	6.4%

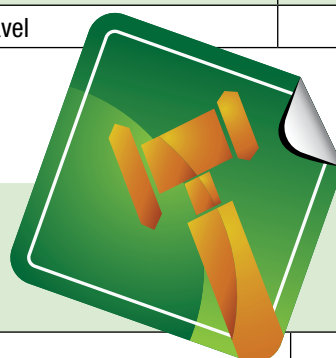


Figure 4: Industries considered for career (seniors, by discipline)

	Discipline	
	Career-oriented	Academic
Industry	% of Respondents	
Agriculture	5.9%	8.8%
Architecture	3.5%	2.3%
Arts	12.8%	21.8%
Business	44.0%	18.8%
Education	21.4%	35.5%
Finance	17.7%	4.6%
Government	13.3%	30.1%
Health sciences	15.9%	17.7%
Hospitality	7.7%	9.1%
Human services	10.5%	34.6%
Information technology	9.3%	4.0%
Law	3.8%	16.1%
Manufacturing	6.2%	1.6%
Marketing	27.2%	16.1%
STEM	15.7%	15.9%
Transportation	5.7%	2.6%



**Figure 5: Salary expectations
(seniors looking for a job, by discipline)**

Expectation	Discipline	
	Career-oriented	Academic
	% of Respondents	
Less than \$20,00	1.7%	8.7%
\$20,000 - \$25,000	4.7%	12.7%
\$25,001 - \$30,000	10.1%	17.7%
\$30,001 - \$35,000	16.2%	20.2%
\$35,001 - \$40,000	16.3%	17.1%
\$40,001 - \$45,000	14.7%	9.9%
\$45,001 - \$50,000	11.1%	5.3%
\$50,001 - \$55,000	9.4%	3.4%
\$55,001 - \$60,000	6.5%	2.0%
\$60,001 - \$65,000	4.8%	1.3%
\$65,001 - \$70,000	1.9%	0.8%
\$70,001 - \$75,000	0.9%	0.2%
\$75,001 - \$80,000	0.5%	0.2%
More than \$80,000	1.1%	0.4%

opportunities.¹⁰ Liberal arts graduates did not take advantage of this resource—at least not to the extent that majors in career-oriented fields did. Thirty-one percent of liberal arts respondents who indicated they were looking for a job said they had never visited their career center. Thirty-five percent of the liberal arts students did report that they visited their career center multiple times during their senior year. However, 40 percent of career-oriented majors took advantage of the career center resources on multiple occasions in their pursuit of a job after graduation.

The one area of the job search where there is no significant difference between the liberal arts graduate and the career-oriented major is in the use of social networking as a job-search tool. Neither type of student employs social networking very much in the job search. (See Figure 6.) More than 60

percent of both career-oriented majors and liberal arts majors did not use their social networks at all in trying to find a job. Those that did tended to use social networks in a similar fashion, with liberal arts graduates even employing the networks a bit more intensively. A greater percentage of the liberal arts students (21 percent) discussed possible job openings on their networks compared with 20 percent of career-oriented students.

Liberal arts majors not only found fewer opportunities for which to apply, but their success rate is also lower. Liberal arts students who applied for a full-time job were less likely to receive an offer, and a smaller percentage of these students had landed a position at the time of the survey. Nearly 66 percent of liberal arts applicants had not received a single job offer prior to graduation compared with 60 percent

of career-oriented majors. Less than 22 percent of the academically oriented liberal arts students had secured a full-time position for after graduation while slightly more than 26 percent of the career-oriented students had a job in hand.

Again, the data do not allow us to completely determine whether these end results occur because the liberal arts major is less attractive to the employment world or because the students themselves find the available jobs less attractive. That the latter may be a possibility is implied by the fact that the acceptance rate for offers is lower among liberal arts graduates than it is among the career-oriented. While the Class of 2010 had a very high overall acceptance rate for job offers compared with previous classes, there was a slightly less enthusiastic response from the students in the liberal arts and sciences.¹¹ Fifty-six percent of the liberal arts students accepted the job offers they received prior to graduation; by comparison, the offer acceptance rate for career-oriented majors was slightly higher than 62 percent.

One reason why the liberal arts students may find these positions unattractive is the compensation connected with the offers they receive. This may be the case even though the starting salaries these graduates are expecting are well below what the career-oriented major is anticipating. Although the median expected salary for liberal arts students looking for a job in 2010 was \$32,699, the median actual offer received by liberal arts graduates was only \$30,287. This was more than 7 percent below expectations and 26 percent lower than the median offer received by career-oriented job seekers (\$41,213).

Conclusion

It is clear that students who concentrate in the academically oriented



liberal arts and sciences face a number of challenges in entering the job market, as do the career counselors who try to assist them. The liberal arts graduate comes out of college with a different set of interests than the career-oriented major—a set of interests that leads the graduate away from the core of the U.S. job market. The result appears to be a less aggressive approach and fewer successes in securing a position after graduation.

The problem is compounded by an employer/recruiter approach, which seems not to value the liberal arts graduate as much as the career-oriented major. Respondents to the NACE *Job Outlook* surveys have consistently emphasized the importance of academic major in both selecting target schools for recruiting and in identifying potential candidates at those target schools. In addition, the added emphasis technological approaches to identifying and evaluating candidates have taken on in recent years may make it more difficult for the liberal arts graduate to get noticed and be considered for a position. The skills that these graduates bring to the table may well be very important for the employer but are more difficult to define and identify in a short-hand, data base-driven process. That process may be more cost-efficient in the short run but may provide a less cost-effective talent acquisition strategy in the long term.¹²


The result is that liberal arts graduates receive fewer offers, less compelling offers, and at dramatically lower compensation levels. The good news is that the differentials in offers and acceptance rates are not exceptionally different for the liberal arts graduate. These differentials may in fact be more related to the propensity of liberal arts graduates to be less aggressive in the job search and to aim their searches at a portion of the economy that is less capable of providing both the number and quality of jobs that are actually attractive to these students.

Figure 6: Employers should use social networking profile (seniors looking for a job, by discipline)

Discipline	Career-oriented	Academic
% of Respondents		
Discuss openings	19.6%	20.8%
Research employers	16.4%	15.0%
Network	29.8%	28.1%
Don't use	60.5%	62.2%

Compensation is the major differential for these liberal arts graduates. Immediately after graduation, the market clearly values them less than their career-oriented counterparts. However, even though compensation may be a serious challenge at the start of a career for the liberal arts graduate, it may not be quite the issue in the long run. A longitudinal study conducted by the National Center for Educational Statistics found that the wage differentials that existed between career-oriented

majors and academically oriented majors immediately following graduation were all but eliminated within 10 years. The rate of compensation growth among the liberal arts graduates was actually greater than for those with career-oriented degrees.¹³

The liberal arts graduate who bemoans his position in the job market upon graduation might be wise to remember the fable about the race between the tortoise and the hare. The tortoise won. 

Endnote

¹ Ann Stouffer Bisconti and Irene L. Gomberg, *The Hard-to-place Majority – a national study of the career outcomes of liberal arts graduates*, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania: The CPC Foundation, 1975.

² 2010 *Recruiting Benchmarks*, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania: National Association of Colleges and Employers, October 2010 and NACE, *Job Outlook 2011*, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania: National Association of Colleges and Employers, November 2010.

³ To be clear, these are the specific fields included here as the liberal arts: area, ethnic, cultural, and gender studies; biological and biomedical sciences; English language and literature; foreign languages, literature, and linguistics; history; liberal arts and sciences—general studies and humanities; mathematics and statistics; multi/interdisciplinary studies; philosophy and religious studies; physical sciences; psychology; social sciences; visual and performing arts.—

⁴ Bisconti and Gomberg, *The Hard-to-place Majority*.

⁵ National Center for Education Statistics, Table 254.

⁶ NACE, 2010 *Recruiting Benchmarks*. Bethlehem, PA: October 2010.

⁷ NACE, *Moving On: Student Attitudes and Approaches to the Job Market, Class of 2010*. Bethlehem, Pennsylvania: September 2010.

⁸ Data developed from information published by the National Center for Education Statistics.

⁹ NACE, *Moving On*, 2010.

¹⁰ NACE, *Moving On*, 2010.

¹¹ NACE, *Moving On*, 2010.

¹² Employers in the NACE *Job Outlook 2010* report ranked communication skills as the most important attribute for a new recruit. Employers have also ranked communication skills as the attribute they are most disappointed with in their new hires.

¹³ Institute for Education Sciences, *Ten Years after College: Employment Experiences of 1992-93 Bachelor Degree Recipients with Academic and Career-Oriented Majors*, Washington: National Center for Education Statistics, February 2008.