

SOME IDEAS FOR LIBERAL ARTS MAJORS THINKING ABOUT CAREERS

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Framing the Problem

Do any of these statements resonate with you?

- I'm so absorbed by a love of certain subjects that I postpone or avoid practical questions such as what I'll do upon graduation.
- I've willingly accepted the challenges of professors, authors, and thinkers who say, "Take a risk and learn something for the sake of knowing it, without demanding to be shown some immediate practical application that can be pursued later."
- I wish to devote myself to life's big and interesting questions and issues, yet many of the most obvious and readily accessible jobs just don't seem to feed this passion.
- My expectations and ambitions are high. I wish to live a life that honors and nourishes the interests and passions I've gained as a liberal arts student.

How would you describe *your* situation with regard to graduating and thinking about a career?

A liberal arts education helps you develop a complex worldview. It shapes values, beliefs, dreams, interests, etc. Naturally you want to validate these things, in part through meaningful work—a career. High ambitions result in a challenging life project, requiring much work and persistence. Infinite choices are overwhelming; high expectations are daunting. Opportunity exists for joy, or disappointment. (Will you validate your worldview through meaningful and rewarding work that you find or create? Or will you be at odds with the world? Your choice!)

Part of the challenge lies in shaping a vision of your own success, in identifying goals or a mission. Do you have a vision, mission, or goal? For instance, to . . .

- Find a career connected explicitly to your major.
- Find a career indirectly connected to your major.
- Find a career fairly unconnected to your major.

Observations about the Challenge

- A liberal arts education represents infinite opportunity and capability, which may either lie dormant or be nurtured to fruition. The challenge lies in bringing it to fruition.
- Ambitious visions require much work.
- Forging a career out of your liberal arts education is a big project requiring much effort, but the rewards can be sweet.
- A liberal arts (or any) degree is not a ticket to easy career success.
- A career represents a series of jobs, work settings, choices, decisions, and many other ingredients.
- College students should have an *approach* to the challenge upon graduation, not necessarily a *solution*, as it's a lifelong project.

Questions to Ponder in Approaching the Challenge

Try to gain a better sense of your particular situation: who you are, your goals, variables relevant to your career project. Pondering these questions may help:

- What attracted you to your major(s)? And to your minor(s)?
- What aspect of your major(s) do you connect with most?
- Does a major define you in some way? Does a major limit you in any way?
- Which classes in your major(s) have been the most stimulating? Least?
- How would you characterize students who seem to connect with your major differently?
- Which of the core requirements did you enjoy most? Least?
- What skills have you developed in your major(s)? That is, what things can you do?
- Do you feel that you have a "calling" with respect to career direction?
- How do you envision your major(s) connecting with your career?
- What do you feel you're here on earth to do? Does this question make sense to you?
- Why did you choose to go to college?
- Why did you choose a liberal arts college? What does liberal arts education mean to you?
- How does college relate to career for you?
- What does career mean to you?
- What has influenced your thoughts about career, and your career plans in particular?
- How would you describe your career thus far?
- What will influence your direction after graduation?
- How do you work through these questions?

Finally, consider replacing this question:

"What job can I do with an art major?"

With these:

"What am I capable of as an art major? As a liberal arts graduate?"

Some Ideas for Tackling These Questions

Try to articulate these things:

- What do you do in this major? What is the central pursuit? What does this entail?
- What are you expected to do? What does this work consist of?
- Be specific: What skills do you practice in this major? What can you do?

For instance, a few skills an English major may possess:

- Can use and analyze figurative language to communicate very effectively and to think critically about the use of language.
- Can detect patterns and themes where apparently hidden, and can connect seemingly disparate ideas.
- Can read and understand very difficult language.
- Can use language precisely.
- Can use language to construct arguments and to clarify concepts.
- Can conduct research.
- Can grasp multiple levels of meaning.

More Questions

Answer these questions in the specific sense, speaking about your work in the major, *not* in a general sense as though trying to explain how this major can be useful in other contexts—work on that later. To keep on task, think about and refer to specific courses, authors, artists, researchers, texts, genres, literatures, etc. *Write to an audience that is as informed about this major as you are.*

- Next, what have you learned in terms of knowledge through your work in this major? What do you know? (Okay, set aside Socrates' strictest definition of the word "knowledge"—just focus on information you've acquired, about which you're fairly confident.) Again, be specific.
- Next, what qualities do you possess that you believe have helped with your success in this major? Be as specific as possible in your explanations.
- Now, how has majoring in your major, and the development of these skills, knowledge, and qualities, contributed to your success in other arenas? (The point here is simple: Convince a reader that the experience of majoring in, say, Art is applicable beyond the classroom, that it has yielded something distinguishable and useful that another experience might not so well have provided. That is, what's unique and special about the Art major?)

Continue Trying to Gain a Clearer Sense of Your Identity

What are your . . .

- Values (What do you believe in and respect? What's important to you?)
- Strengths
- Skills
- Interests
- Experiences
- Mottos, creeds

The more you understand your skills and interests, and your relationship to your major, the closer you are to articulating these things to someone who will value them. You must learn these things and be able to discuss them with passion. (Professors and career staff can help you work on this.)

Once you are able to speak coherently about (at least a subset of) your interests, skills, goals, and mission, connect with people whose missions interest you:

- Talk with students, administrators, and faculty involved with interesting graduate programs.
- Attend events likely to attract similarly minded people.
- Read widely. Listen.
- Use resources such as your career center, library, and Alumni Association.
- Conduct informational interviews with people to learn about interesting work opportunities and to develop a body of knowledge and perspectives about your career interests.

Strategies for Carving Out and Shaping a Career

- Work on projects that excite you, and make this show in your work.
- Develop expertise at something. Know details.
- Connect with people who share your values. Share resources, ideas.
- Pick projects strategically, to learn, to accomplish, to work with cool people.

Recognize that your name WILL conjure associations in people's minds. You WILL be known for something. What will it be? (You can shape this or have it shaped for you.)

What do you want to be known for, in terms of skills, personality, work ethic, attitude, knowledge, passions, etc.?

In 6 months you'll be better at something, more experienced at something.
(What will it be?)

Learn to convey the **significance** of your experience, your skill. (How is your experience and skill important? How can it benefit others?)

Create a Mission Statement

An example:

My mission is to live life to the fullest, to make good on the gift of humanity by using my talents and opportunities in the service of worthwhile people, ideas, and enterprises. This means doing and enjoying work that is meaningful and valuable to myself and others, which for me means the ongoing pursuit and validation of liberal arts education.

What Inspires You?

An example:

A human being should be able to change a diaper,
Plan an invasion, butcher a hog, conn a ship,
Design a building, write a sonnet, balance accounts,
Build a wall, set a bone, comfort the dying, take orders,
Give orders, cooperate, act alone, solve equations,
Analyze a new problem, pitch manure, program a
Computer, cook a tasty meal, fight efficiently, die gallantly.
Specialization is for insects.

–Robert Heinlein

**Verbalize your mission. Write about what you wish to do. Discuss it with others.
Think about it. Live it.**

"drink Life to the lees . . . strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield."

–Tennyson