

Rethinking Liberal Arts Skills in the New Economy

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Liberal arts graduates can compete effectively for jobs in the current information-based economy. The literature overview of liberal arts advising is presented as is a discussion on the student skills needed for success in the new economy. Strategies advisors can use to help liberal arts majors develop new economy skills and specific suggestions for helping advisees market these skills to potential employers are presented.

KEY WORDS: career advising, course advising, departmental advising, educational planning, majors, student educational objectives

The day finally arrives. Your advisee completes her freshman year and musters the courage to tell her parents that she has decided to major in political science. Without hesitation, her parents express their skepticism: What can you do with a liberal arts degree? What kind of job can you expect?

Prepared for the barrage, she delivers her well-rehearsed response. She explains that a liberal arts degree can lead to a wide range of career opportunities. She says that liberal arts majors pursue professional degrees, undertake graduate work, and find rewarding careers in the public, private, and nonprofit sectors. Despite the effort, her parents remain unconvinced.

Through this article, I argue that liberal arts curricula, defined by Nadler (1998) as those fields including English, literature, and the social, physical, and natural sciences, offer a competitive edge for job seekers in the current information-based economy. I present a literature overview on liberal arts advising and discuss the skills needed for success in the new economy. I also present strategies advisors can use to help liberal arts majors develop new economy skills and provide specific suggestions for marketing these skills to potential employers.

Liberal Arts Advising

Authors of academic advising literature emphasize the importance of connecting broader educational goals with specific career objectives. For example, through a five-stage model, O'Banion (1972) addressed the exploration of life goals, investigation of career and educational objectives, program choice, course selection, and class scheduling. Citing O'Banion, proponents of developmental

advising focus on personal, career, and educational goals of students (Ender, Winston, & Miller, 1984).

While recognizing the importance of developmental advising, scholars have argued that one person may not be able to provide students the full range of needed services (Habley, 1984). Faculty advisors prioritize the selection and scheduling of courses but may spend relatively little time discussing life and career goals. Conversely, career counselors address life and career goals but do not routinely discuss academic programs and specific courses. Because of these cross-purposed agendas, scholars have suggested that academic advising programs serve as a "hub of support services" in which academic advisors become the central contacts for students who are considering their career- and life-planning goals (Habley 1984). However, academic advisors may find working with liberal arts students particularly challenging because the connections between educational training and career opportunities are less clear for liberal arts majors than for preprofessional students.

Although books on academic success for liberal arts students (Figler, Carter, Bishop, & Kravits, 2002) and career guides for liberal arts majors (Camenson, 1997; Figler, 1979, 1989; Giangrande, 1998; Nadler, 1998) have been published, few authors have focused specifically on liberal arts advising. These authors primarily addressed faculty advising and suggested that departmental faculty offer courses in career planning (Munski, 1983), appoint career coordinators (Oatis-Skinner & Betz, 1998), and work with community practitioners to identify career options for students (Borgard, 1981). Although his article is not specific to liberal arts advising, Grites (1983, p. 13) advocated a "skills approach to career development" in which the student should gain writing, speaking, research and analytical, organizational and leadership, interpersonal, and quantitative proficiencies.

I built on the skills approach to career development by providing advisors with suggestions on helping liberal arts students synthesize personal, career, and educational goals. As the central contact persons, academic advisors are uniquely positioned to articulate the usefulness of a liberal arts degree, help students overcome fears about life after graduation, and work with students to develop academic plans for success in the new economy.

Liberal Arts and the New Economy

Advisors should refer liberal arts students to the growing evidence that new economy organizations covet the skills of liberal arts graduates. In 2000, chief executive officers from 30 high-tech Canadian companies issued a statement on the importance of a liberal arts education. In the statement, they called for a "balanced approach" to education and said that a "liberal arts-and-science education nurtures skills and talents increasingly valued in modern corporations" (Luke, 2000, C8).

Advisors should also note that liberal arts students might be better prepared to adapt to economic changes than students with more technical training. Scholars have provided evidence that the generic nature of liberal arts creates "greater longevity" and facilitates "continued, lifelong learning in the face of labor market changes" (Giles & Drewes, 2001, p. 7). According to Todd Hand, Director of Hiring at the Yankee Group, a technology, market research, and consulting firm in Boston, "We're looking less for specific majors and more so for specific fundamentals, personality, and characteristics" (Ritter, 1999, M5). He also noted, "Business changes so quickly you can't just hire for what the landscape looks like today, you need to hire bright people that can change with the business landscape" (Ritter, 1999, M5). Retired Dartmouth President James O. Freedman made a similar argument, "A liberal education is what teaches people how to write and how to think and makes them much more valuable in the job market over a 40-year career than graduates of a preprofessional program" (Rimer, 2003, B7).

New Economy Skills

Advisors should make the case that new economy organizations value core liberal arts skills, including written communication, oral communication, creativity, critical thinking, and theoretical thinking (see Table 1). According to economist Robert Allen (1999, p. 1), "The new-style organizations put a premium on workers who can relate models to real situations, work well with other members of a management team or with clients, and who can speak and write effectively."

In addition to core liberal arts skills, advisors should help students develop research design and data analysis skills. These skills are critical for managing information in the new economy. For example, employees at McKinsey & Company, a leading strategic consulting firm, rely on a problem-solving process that is fact based, rigidly structured, and hypothesis driven (Rasiel, 1998, p. 3).

Consultants generate strategies for increasing sales (hypotheses) and gather information (empirical evidence) to determine which of the strategies has the greatest prospect for success.

Liberal arts students should know that research design and data analysis skills are also used in the growing area of customer relationship management (CRM). CRM professionals focus on "the infrastructure that enables the delineation of and increase in customer value, and the correct means by which to motivate valuable customers to remain loyal" (Dyche, 2001, p. 4). To achieve these goals, organizational researchers collect and analyze data about the preferences and buying patterns of customers. CRM has become even more important with increased on-line commerce; through data obtained through Internet transactions, analysts can easily record customer preferences and target future customers.

Liberal arts advisors should tell students that computer application skills are also crucial for information management in the new economy. For example, company researchers use business intelligence software as a key resource to collect and analyze information. Company leaders subsequently use the information to better manage relationships with customers. In the United Kingdom, the Newcastle City Council implemented business intelligence software to shorten training times, provide faster responses to callers, and increase resolutions per customer service agent (Perrin, 2000). To bolster donor recruitment and retention programs, managers at the nonprofit Canadian Blood Services use business intelligence software that identifies geographic regions and correlates demographic characteristics with low donor rates (Pappone, 2000).

Administrators utilize the business intelligence products of many software companies including Cognos, MicroStrategy, Business Objects, SAP, and Oracle. In addition, business intelligence software has become increasingly accessible with the release of Microsoft's Data Analyzer program. Geographic information systems (GIS) software, used to identify geographic patterns, and social science statistical packages, designed to analyze quantitative data, are also useful industry tools.

Advisors should also encourage students to develop general business skills. Whether working in the public, private, or nonprofit sector, students should understand basic accounting, finance, and management principles.

With proper advisement, liberal arts majors can develop the new economy skills to help organiza-

tional leaders better manage information. Well-trained students should strengthen core liberal arts skills and supplement these skills with proficiency in research design, data analysis, and computer applications. In addition, liberal arts students should develop basic business skills. As undergraduates, they should enhance new economy skills and subsequently emphasize them when seeking employment.

Courses for Enhancing New Economy Skills

Advisors should know what skills are needed in the new economy and guide students to courses where they can develop these skills (see Table 1). First, advisors should encourage students to enroll in traditional liberal arts courses to enhance core liberal arts skills. Students can develop written-communication competence in a wide variety of courses, including those in history and English. Students should take communication courses and other classes requiring oral presentations. Advisors should

also encourage students to enroll in philosophy and political theory courses that cultivate theoretical thinking skills.

Advisors should guide students to classes on research design and data analysis. Many of the techniques used by top management consultants have been taught for decades in social science methodology courses. Students should choose social science research classes in which instructors emphasize data collection, hypothesis development, questionnaire construction, and issues of reliability and validity. Advisors should direct students to both qualitative and quantitative data analysis courses. Students should be proficient in descriptive statistics; hypothesis testing; and crosstabular, bivariate, and multivariate analyses. In addition to discipline-specific social-science data-analysis courses, students can develop analytical skills in applied statistics and policy analysis classes. Advisors might also encourage students to present papers at undergrad-

Table 1 New economy skills and courses

| New Economy Skills | Courses for Enhancing New Economy Skills |
|--|--|
| Core Liberal Arts Skills <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Written Communication • Oral Communication • Creativity • Critical Thinking • Theoretical Thinking | Traditional liberal arts courses with written and oral components. Courses in history, English, and communications may be particularly beneficial. Philosophy and political theory classes can develop theoretical thinking. |
| Research Design Skills <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data Collection • Hypothesis Development • Questionnaire Construction • Issues of Validity and Reliability | Social science research courses. Research design skills usually covered in the first semester of a two-semester research sequence. |
| Data Analysis Skills <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Qualitative Analysis • Quantitative Analysis • Descriptive Statistics • Hypothesis Testing • Crosstabular Analysis • Bivariate Statistics • Multivariate Statistics | Applied statistics courses and discipline-specific social-science data-analysis courses. Courses in policy analysis may also be beneficial. |
| Computer Application Skills <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spreadsheet Applications • Social Science Statistical Software • Geographic Information Systems Software | Social science statistical-analysis courses, computer information systems courses, and geography or public administration courses for geographic information systems skills. |
| General Business Skills <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accounting • Finance • Management | Basic business courses. Public administration courses for public sector accounting, management, and finance. |

uate research conferences, assist faculty members with research projects, and write a senior thesis.

Liberal arts students should develop computer skills. According to Nancy Pool Dixon, director of the Career Center at the University of Denver, graduates who have combined liberal arts with computer skills are hot prospects for employers (Scanlon, 1998). When possible, students should learn to analyze data using a variety of software programs, including GIS, social science statistics packages, and basic spreadsheet applications, such as Microsoft Excel. Students can learn computer application skills in social-science methodology and computer information-systems classes as well as in geography courses with a GIS component.

In addition to directing students to new economy skills in liberal arts classes, advisors should suggest basic business courses in management, finance, and accounting. Students interested in public sector finance and management should take public administration classes. Rather than pursue a double major or a minor in a liberal arts discipline, undergraduates can enhance career prospects by enrolling in a wide range of courses. Advisors might even suggest that liberal arts students minor in a technology related field.¹

Marketing New Economy Skills

While liberal arts majors have many valuable skills, private sector employers sometimes hire business majors, overlooking potential employees with liberal arts degrees. Therefore, advisors should guide students in marketing new economy skills to potential employers.

First, advisors should encourage students to work with the career services personnel to identify potential employers. Students should also attend campus career fairs and seek advice from faculty members with professional backgrounds. Advisors might also encourage students to meet with community leaders, seek out professional organizations, and pursue informational interviews with prospective companies. Advisors can guide students to internships. Many companies have college internship programs, and in most cases, a manager would rather hire an intern that has done good work than take a chance on an unknown hire.

Second, liberal arts majors should become familiar with the language used in business. Many business skills are familiar to liberal arts graduates,

but the functions may be identified by different terms. For example, social scientists divide populations into cohorts, while business analysts examine customers through market segmentation. By taking selected business courses, students will become familiar with terminology used in the private sector. Students can also become familiar with business jargon by reading selected business books from the best-seller list.

Third students should emphasize new economy skills whenever possible. Resumes should include research proficiencies and the types of research conducted. In addition, students should mention specific statistical techniques they have performed and software applications they have utilized. On their resumes, they should also highlight relevant course work; this emphasis may be particularly important for students who do not have a formal minor or second major.

Fourth, advisors should encourage students to highlight computer skills. Students might consider a technology certification test created by the Virginia Foundation of Independent Colleges to measure "information literacy, problem solving, and technology skills" (Agee & Holisky 2000, p. 10; "Assessing Technology Across the Curriculum," n.d.). Companies, including CSX, Norfolk Southern, and First Virginia Bank, have committed to hiring applicants who pass the test ("New Certification Exam," 1999). Finally, advisors should encourage students to highlight the core liberal arts skills of written and oral communication. New economy organizations need people who cannot only collect information but who can explain research findings. Students should emphasize their presentation skills on resumes and during interviews. In addition to jobs in communications, liberal arts graduates with strong presentation skills may find successful careers as corporate trainers; these individuals facilitate meetings, instruct employees on new software, and present updated company procedures.

Conclusions

The advisor of the political science student facing doubting parents is uniquely positioned to help her develop an academic plan in which personal, educational, and career goals were considered. The advisor should begin by articulating the importance of core liberal arts skills in the new economy.

¹ Advisors might refer students to George Washington University's Technology Across the Curriculum program. Liberal arts students in the program can choose from technology minors in computer science, data analysis, electronic journalism, telecommunications, GIS, and multimedia (Agee & Holisky, 2000).

The advisor should highlight the evidence that corporate executives value a liberal arts education, and he or she should argue that general skills can better prepare the student for changing economic conditions than preprofessional courses. The advisor should encourage the political science major to supplement core liberal arts skills with proficiencies in research design, data analysis, computer applications, and general areas of business. These new economy skills will help the student become more competitive in the informationbased economy.

Perhaps most important, the advisor should encourage the political science student to take a variety of classes that uniquely position her in the job market. The advisor should guide her to traditional liberal arts courses and classes in social science research, applied statistics, computer information systems, and general business.

Finally, the advisor should help the political science major market herself successfully. The student should be directed to the campus career center and use internships to gain exposure to potential employers. The advisor should also encourage the student to become familiar with the language used in business and know how her skills translate outside of her discipline. Armed with information, the political science major can convince potential employers and her parents of the value of a liberal arts degree in the new economy.

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